# Table of Contents

**Summary** ..............................................................................................................................................................1

**Act and Scene Summaries** ..................................................................................................................................2

**Themes** .................................................................................................................................................................9

**Characters** .........................................................................................................................................................13

**Analysis** ..............................................................................................................................................................24

**Quotes** .................................................................................................................................................................45

**Critical Essays** ...................................................................................................................................................73

**Teaching Guide** .............................................................................................................................................1006

**Short-Answer Quizzes** ..................................................................................................................................1013
Summary

At the beginning of the play, three witches appear and speak about meeting Macbeth. The scene shifts to a military camp, where Duncan, the king of Scotland, and his son Malcolm hear about Macbeth and Banquo's bravery and mettle in battle against the Norwegians. The witches appear before Macbeth and Banquo on a heath and deliver a prophecy: Macbeth will be made the thane of Cawdor and will ultimately become king, while Banquo is said to be the ancestor of future kings. The first part of the prophecy comes true almost immediately when two of Duncan's men, Ross and Angus, appear to tell Macbeth, who is already the thane of Glamis, that he will be made thane of Cawdor, as the person who previously held that position has committed treason.

Macbeth writes to Lady Macbeth, his wife, and tells her what has happened. Lady Macbeth believes that her husband must do what it takes to win the crown and suggests killing King Duncan, who is arriving at their castle that night. Macbeth is initially hesitant, but his wife eventually convinces him to commit the murder. Macbeth kills the king, making it look like two servants did so, and Macduff finds the king's body. Malcolm and Donalbain, the king's sons, flee to England and Ireland, fearing for their lives.

In the absence of the king's sons, Macbeth is made king and hosts Banquo at his house. Eager to keep his crown, Macbeth recalls the prophecy that Banquo's descendants will be made king and decides he must hire assassins to murder Banquo and his son. Banquo is killed but his son, Fleance, manages to escape. Banquo's ghost appears at Macbeth's dinner that night, which terrifies Macbeth and drives him to visit the witches in hopes that they will clarify what will happen to him. They give him three more prophecies: that he should fear Macduff, that no man "of woman born" will hurt him, and that Macbeth cannot be vanquished until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill. Macbeth also sees the shadows of eight kings, followed by the ghost of Banquo.

His confidence restored by the witches' prophecies, Macbeth is determined to eliminate Macduff. Macduff has fled Scotland, but cruelly, Lady Macduff and her son are killed by Macbeth's assassins. Macduff, who has vowed revenge on Macbeth, and Malcom meet abroad and agree to head back to Scotland, where ten thousand men are gathering to take on Macbeth, who is considered a tyrant by his subjects. Meanwhile, Lady Macbeth begins to lose her sanity, sleepwalking around her castle and trying to clean her hands, which she imagines have blood on them.

Soldiers gather in Scotland, but Macbeth feels that he is safe, as the witches said no man of woman born can harm him. Lady Macbeth commits suicide, unable to bear her role in Duncan's murder. A messenger then tells Macbeth that the woods are coming towards his castle; Malcolm has told his men to cover themselves with branches, creating an illusion that the forest is creeping closer. Macbeth kills Young Siward, but learns that Macduff's mother gave birth to him through a cesarean section, so he wasn't technically born "of" a woman but rather taken from her womb. Macduff kills Macbeth, and Malcolm is proclaimed king.
Act and Scene Summaries

Act 1 Summary

Scene 1

Three witches speak together during a thunderstorm and attempt to decide when they should meet again. They decide that they will reconvene on a heath after the ongoing battle has concluded ("When the hurly-burly's done"), at which time they will also speak with Macbeth.

Scene 2

Duncan, the king of Scotland, and his son Malcolm, get a report from a wounded captain about the battlefront. The captain reports that Macbeth has slain the rebel, Macdonwald; that the king of Norway sent more troops to fight the Scottish forces; and that Macbeth and Banquo were fighting valiantly when the captain was removed from the field. The thane of Ross soon reports that the loyal Scots won, defeating the traitorous thane of Cawdor. Duncan orders the execution of Cawdor and awards that title to Macbeth, who is already the thane of Glamis.

Scene 3

The witches meet again, and one of them describes her intention to go and torture the husband of a local woman who refused to share her chestnuts with the witch. The others will assist. Their exchange reveals them to be rather malicious and mean-spirited. Just then, Banquo and Macbeth enter, and the witches confront them, hailing Macbeth as the thane of Glamis (a title he already has), the thane of Cawdor (a title he does not yet know he's been awarded), and the future king of Scotland. Banquo wants to know what his future holds, and the sisters tell him that he will never be king himself but that he will "get kings": that is, his descendants will be kings. When Macbeth asks for more information, the witches vanish. Just then, Ross and Angus (Duncan's men) enter and tell Macbeth that he has been named the thane of Cawdor. This makes Macbeth believe that the witches were telling him the truth, though Banquo is still skeptical of their motives.

Scene 4

King Duncan laments that the old thane of Cawdor betrayed him. He trusted the man and thought they were friends. When Macbeth and Banquo arrive, he expresses his gratitude for them, though he declares Malcolm to be his heir to the throne. Macbeth seems, already, to be thinking of what he might have to do in order to become king; he asks that the stars "hide [their] fires" so that his "black and deep desires" for power don't become visible to others.

Scene 5

Lady Macbeth enters, reading a letter from her husband which acquaints her with both the prophecies he received and the news of his new title. She wholeheartedly believes that he will become king, though she fears that he is too good to "catch the nearest way." She wants him to murder Duncan and seize the throne now. A messenger enters to tell her that the king will arrive at her house tonight, and she prays to become ruthless and unfeminine so that she can enact her bloody plans. Macbeth arrives and finds that he and his wife are actually thinking the same thing, and she cautions him to hide his evil intentions beneath a friendly exterior.
Scene 6

Duncan arrives at the Macbeths' castle; he compliments his hostess, and Lady Macbeth flatters him back. He asks to speak with Macbeth, telling her that "We love him highly."

Scene 7

Macbeth lists the myriad reasons he has chosen not to kill Duncan, and he decides against his ambition. When he tells Lady Macbeth that he doesn't want to proceed with their plot to kill the king, she insults and berates him—asking, "Art thou afeard / To be the same in thine own act and valor / As thou art in desire?"—until he changes his mind again. When the act ends, the two seem of one mind again.

Act 2 Summary

Scene 1

It is late at night, and Banquo is having trouble sleeping because he can't stop thinking about the witches. Macbeth, of course, is still awake because he is preparing to kill Duncan, and the two meet by chance in the hall of his castle. They discuss the witches' prophecy; Banquo indicates that he has dreamed about them, and Macbeth lies, "I think not of them." Once Macbeth is alone, he hallucinates a dagger like the kind he plans to use to kill the king. The dagger becomes bloody, and Macbeth recognizes that the hallucination is likely the result of his stress and the guilt he feels about killing the king. The dagger seems, too, to represent fate: Macbeth says to the dagger, "Thou marshal'st me the way I was going." He hears the bell that indicates the time, and he leaves the stage to kill the king.

Scene 2

Lady Macbeth awaits the return of her husband, having drugged the grooms that protect Duncan's room. Macbeth enters, saying, "I have done the deed." They are both very much on edge, and Macbeth has brought the murder weapons out rather than planting them on the grooms, whom the Macbeths intended to frame. Lady Macbeth berates Macbeth once more for his weakness and compares him to a child that "fears a painted devil." When she exits to place the weapons near the grooms and Macbeth is left alone, it is clear that he feels guilt for his actions; he notes that "all great Neptune's ocean" could not wash the blood from his hands. After Lady Macbeth returns and the two hear a knocking at the door, they quickly retire to bed so that they can pretend to have been asleep.

Scene 3

A porter pretends to be working at the gate to hell, but he finally opens the door for Macduff and more of Duncan's retinue. Lennox, a thane, reports that it was a strange night. Macduff goes to awaken the king and finds his dead body instead. He tells the rest of the house, and Macbeth kills the guards that he framed, telling the others that he did so because they obviously killed Duncan and he could not control his anger. Malcolm and Donalbain agree to flee the country for their own safety.

Scene 4

An old man and the thane of Ross discuss the strange things that have been happening since the king's murder (some time has passed, perhaps a couple of weeks at most): it is dark in the middle of the day, "A falcon... was by a mousing owl hawked at and killed," and Duncan's horses have turned on each other and tried to "eat
each other.” Everyone assumes that Duncan’s sons hired the chamberlains to kill their father, though something doesn’t seem to sit right with Macduff. He says that he is going home to Fife rather than to Macbeth’s coronation.

Act 3 Summary

Scene 1

Banquo paces the royal palace in Forres, considering the prophecies of the witches and Macbeth’s coronation. He muses that the witches correctly predicted Macbeth would become king, which means that it is possible their prediction that Banquo’s line will sit on the throne might come true as well. Macbeth enters with Lady Macbeth and invites Banquo to attend the feast they are hosting that evening. Banquo accepts their invitation and informs Macbeth that he plans on going for a ride on his horse this afternoon, which gives Macbeth an opportunity to carry out his plan. Macbeth then mentions they need to discuss the issue of Malcolm and Donalbain, as the brothers have fled Scotland and may be plotting against the crown. Macbeth dismisses his court as Banquo exits and is left alone in the hall with a single servant.

The servant informs Macbeth about some men who have come to see him, and Macbeth orders that the men be brought to him. He begins a soliloquy in which he considers Banquo, specifically the fact that Banquo is the only man in Scotland whom he fears. He recalls that in their prophecy, the witches “hailed [Banquo] father to a line of kings / Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown.” This means Macbeth will not have an heir, and Banquo’s family line is destined to take over the throne. Banquo commented on this same part of the prophecy earlier in this scene; however, Macbeth considers it with trepidation, while Banquo considered it with a sense of ambition.

Macbeth then meets with the two men he has hired to murder Banquo. He reminds them of the ways Banquo has wronged them in the past, and they assure him that they are ready to fulfill his orders. Macbeth tells the murderers to kill Banquo’s son, Fleance, as well, and to wait in the castle for his command.

Scene 2

In another part of the castle, Lady Macbeth discusses her unhappiness. She remarks, “Naught’s had, all’s spent, / Where our desire is got without content.” She summons her husband, who confirms that he, too, is unhappy with the results of the murder of Duncan, because there are still other threats to the throne. Lady Macbeth tells her husband to be happy and enjoy the feast tonight, and he asks her to do the same. He tells her to be especially jovial toward Banquo to lure him into a false sense of security before Macbeth enacts his plan.

Scene 3

At dusk, the two murderers from scene 1, joined by a third murderer, wait in the woods outside of the palace. Banquo and Fleance return from a ride on their horses, and the murderers attack them. Banquo is killed after telling Fleance to flee and avenge his death. One of the murderers accidentally extinguishes the torch they had lit, and Fleance uses this opportunity to escape. After Banquo is dead, one of the murderers remarks, “There’s but one down. The son is fled.” The murderers go to tell Macbeth what has happened.

Scene 4

The first murderer arrives at the feast hosted by Macbeth to tell him what transpired, and Macbeth remarks that his fear and anger have not subsided, because Fleance escaped and "the worm that's fled / Hath nature that
in time will venom breed.” Macbeth returns to the feast but finds the ghost of Banquo sitting in his chair. Macbeth begins to speak to the ghost, and Lady Macbeth makes excuses for her husband and says the guests should ignore his behavior. Macbeth eventually snaps out of his trance and returns to his guests when the ghost disappears. Banquo’s ghost reappears, however, as Macbeth is giving a toast, and Macbeth begins having more angry outbursts. Lady Macbeth ushers the guests into another room, and Banquo’s ghost disappears again. The scene ends with Macbeth telling Lady Macbeth that Macduff plans to stay away from the court, which is treasonous behavior. He decides to visit the witches again the following day to find out who may still be plotting against him. Macbeth reflects, "I am in blood / Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as a go o'er,” acknowledging the increasing body count caused by his ambition.

Scene 5

The witches meet with the goddess of witchcraft, Hecate. She is not pleased that they have gotten themselves involved in Macbeth's business and decides that she will take charge of this situation. She instructs them to summon visions and spirits that will confuse Macbeth and draw him into a false sense of security when he visits them the next day.

Scene 6

Lennox walks with another lord, discussing their concerns about the kingdom. Although Banquo's murder has officially been blamed on Fleance, they both suspect Macbeth was actually behind it. Lennox is informed that Macduff has joined Malcolm in England to request aid from King Edward. Lennox and the lord hope the men are successful in England, but this news has caused Macbeth to begin preparing for war.

Act 4 Summary

Scene 1

The three witches surround their cauldron, which bubbles and smokes with "a charm of powerful trouble." They throw many macabre ingredients, such as the mummified flesh of a witch and the "Finger of birth-strangled babe," into it. Macbeth enters and insists that the witches answer his questions, and the witches respond by summoning three apparitions.

The first apparition takes the form of a severed head wearing a helmet, and it tells Macbeth to "Beware Macduff." The second apparition takes the form of a bloody child, and it instructs Macbeth to be "bloody, bold and resolute," for, it says, "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth." Macbeth takes this news well, thinking that it means that no mortal man, Macduff included, can harm him. Nonetheless, he decides that he will kill Macduff just to make sure. The third apparition appears in the form of a child with a crown on his head and a tree branch in his hand. The third apparition tells Macbeth that he will "never vanquished be until / Great Birnham Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him." In other words, Macbeth will not be defeated, the apparition says, until Birnham Wood moves to a different place. Macbeth also takes this news well, reasoning that it is quite impossible for a wood to move of its own accord. Macbeth deems what he has heard from the three apparitions to be "sweet omens."

Macbeth then asks one more question. He wants to know if Banquo's sons will rule as kings after him. In response, the witches produce a procession of eight ghostly kings who march across the stage. The last of the eight holds a mirror and is followed by the ghost of Banquo. The mirror reflects the line of kings and gives the impression that the line continues indefinitely. Meanwhile, Banquo smiles and points at Macbeth, which
seems to confirm Macbeth's fears that the royal dynasty shall be Banquo's rather than his.

At the end of the scene, Macbeth learns from Lennox that Macduff has fled to England, and Macbeth regrets that he didn't kill Macduff while he had the chance. He decides, nonetheless, that he will still arrange for Macduff's "wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls / that trace him in his line" to be killed.

**Scene 2**

Lady Macduff criticizes her husband for fleeing to England and leaving her and their children to fend for themselves. She says that her husband has acted out of fear rather than love.

There follows a brief exchange between Lady Macduff and her son, which seems to be intended mostly to invoke empathy for the abandoned Lady Macduff and her children. Their conversation is interrupted by a messenger, who warns Lady Macduff, "some danger does approach you nearly." The messenger advises Lady Macduff to leave immediately, but before she has an opportunity to act on the advice, two murderers enter and kill her son. A sobbing Lady Macduff exits the stage, and the two murderers follow close behind.

**Scene 3**

Malcolm and Macduff reflect upon the state of Scotland. Malcolm complains that under Macbeth's rule, Scotland "weeps, it bleeds," and that with every new day, "a gash / is added to her wounds."

Macduff then tries to persuade Malcolm to join him to fight against Macbeth. Malcolm, however, insists that he would be even worse than Macbeth and that Macbeth would "seem as pure as snow" in comparison to him. Malcolm says that he is "avaricious, false, deceitful . . . smacking of every sin / that has a name." In response, Macduff ardently mourns for Scotland, and exclaims, "Oh my heart, your hope is dead!"

After hearing Macduff's passionate outburst, Malcolm is convinced that he is sincere about fighting Macbeth to save Scotland. Malcolm admits that he is not in fact guilty of the sins he has just admitted to, but was only testing Macduff's integrity. He explains to Macduff that "Devilish Macbeth / By many of these trains hath sought to win me / into his power." In other words, Macbeth has tried to trick Malcolm before, and so now Malcolm is especially careful about who he trusts. Malcolm now agrees to help Macduff in the fight against Macbeth.

At the end of the scene, we learn that King Edward of England has agreed to help Macduff and Malcolm to fight Macbeth. King Edward has sent to them an experienced soldier, Siward, as well as "ten thousand men." We then learn from Ross that Macduff's children and wife have all been "Savagely slaughtered." Macduff is, of course, grief-stricken—and now even more desperate to kill Macbeth. The scene ends with Malcolm promising Macduff and the audience that "The night is long that never finds the day." In other words, a new day for Scotland is about to dawn, and Macduff and Malcolm will be the ones to bring it about. The end of act 4 sets up the civil war to come in act 5.

**Act 5 Summary**

**Scene 1**

Lady Macbeth appears, seemingly sleepwalking, before her doctor and her lady-in-waiting. Macbeth's wife then begins what her "gentlewoman" describes as an "accustomed habit with her": going through the motions of washing her hands, though no water is to be found. As Lady Macbeth speaks, the audience realizes that her
strange behavior is borne of her guilt for her complicity in her husband's treacherous and violent rise to the throne. After "washing" her hands, she says that "all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this hand," figuratively stained with the blood of Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff's family. It is clear that the once fearsome Lady Macbeth, having goaded her husband into action, has been driven mad by guilt.

**Scene 2**

It is revealed that a Scottish army is joining the English one led by Malcolm. The two armies will meet near Birnham Wood and advance together to attack Macbeth at his castle in Dunsinane.

**Scene 3**

As Macbeth learns of the approaching armies from a terrified servant, he is without fear, fortified by the witches' prophecy that "no man that's born of woman" can kill him. Even though a reported ten thousand men are advancing on the castle, Macbeth determines that he will defend it to the death.

**Scene 4**

The leaders of the Scottish rebels join with Malcolm, who orders them to cut limbs off of the trees in Birnam Wood, the forest surrounding the castle. Malcolm notes that holding the boughs above their heads will keep Macbeth from knowing how many of them there are. Siward tells the group that Macbeth, the "confident tyrant," is barricaded in his castle—and so their armies will go to Dunsinane.

**Scene 5**

Macbeth, preparing to meet the onslaught, learns that his wife has committed suicide. He ponders the meaninglessness of his life and his ambitions in a remarkably bleak soliloquy that characterizes life as a "tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing." As he ponders his wife's death, he receives a disturbing report from a messenger who tells him that Birnam Wood is beginning to move toward them. He has witnessed the attackers, bearing boughs from the trees, advancing up the hill. Crucially, this fulfills the one part of the witches' prophecy—namely, that he cannot lose his throne until Birnam Wood marches on Dunsinane.

**Scene 6**

Malcolm, Siward, Macduff, and their army prepare for battle. Malcolm tells the troops to "throw down" their "leafy screens" before the conflict begins. Siward wishes Malcolm and Macduff luck in defeating "the tyrant's power." War trumpets sound as the scene ends and they exit.

**Scene 7**

The battle begins, and Macbeth, who compares himself to a bear tied to a stake, resolves to fight to the death, still believing in the second part of the witches' prophecy—that none of woman born can hurt him. After killing the son of Siward, a nobleman, Macbeth exits the scene; as the castle is about to fall to the invaders, Macduff appears, desperately seeking to avenge the deaths of his wife and children.
Scene 8

Macduff and Macbeth square off for a fight to the death. Macduff informs a shocked Macbeth that he was "from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd," meaning that he was born by cesarean section. This means that he is technically "not of woman born," and Macbeth, realizing that he has been deceived by the witches, is determined to fight nevertheless. He is killed by Macduff, who appears before Malcolm and Siward carrying the decapitated head of Macbeth and hails Malcolm as the new king of Scotland.
Themes

In *Macbeth*, ambition conspires with unholy forces to commit evil deeds which, in their turn, generate fear, guilt and still more horrible crimes. Above all, *Macbeth* is a character study in which not one, but two protagonists (the title character and Lady Macbeth) respond individually and jointly to the psychological burden of their sins. In the course of the play, Macbeth repeatedly misinterprets the guilt that he suffers as being simply a matter of fear. His characteristic way of dealing with his guilt is to face it directly by committing still more misdeeds, and this, of course, only generates further madness. By contrast, Lady Macbeth is fully aware of the difference between fear and guilt, and she attempts to prevent pangs of guilt by first denying her own sense of conscience and then by focusing her attention upon the management of Macbeth's guilt. In the scene which occurs immediately after Duncan's death, Lady Macbeth orders her husband to get some water "and wash this filthy witness from your hand" (II.i.43-44). He rejects her suggestion, crying out, "What hands are here. Ha! they pluck out mine eyes! / Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?" (II.i.56-58). But she in turn insists that the tell-tale signs of his crime cannot be seen by others, that "a little water clears us of this deed" (II.i.64). But midway through the play, Lady Macbeth loses both her influence over her husband and the ability to repress her own conscience. Once her husband has departed to combat against Macduff's forces and Lady Macbeth is left alone, she assumes the very manifestations of guilt that have been associated with Macbeth, insomnia and hallucinations, in even more extreme form.

As for the motive behind the theme of guilt, it is ambition for power, and it does not require much for Macbeth to embrace the weird sisters’ vision of him as the ruler of all Scotland. Macbeth is ambitious, but it is Lady Macbeth who is the driving force behind their blood-stained rise to the throne(s) of Scotland. Lady Macbeth is awesome in her ambition and possesses a capacity for deceit that Shakespeare often uses as a trait of his evil female characters. Thus, when she greets her prospective victim in Act I, she "humbly" tells King Duncan that she has eagerly awaited his arrival and that her preparations for it are "in every point twice done, and then double done" (I.vi.14-18). The irony here is that double-dealing and falsity are at hand, and Lady Macbeth’s ability to conceal her intentions while at the same time making hidden reference to them has a startling effect upon us.

Beyond the evil that human ambition can manufacture, Macbeth has a super-natural dimension to it; indeed, the play opens with the three witches stirring the plot forward. Even before his encounter with the three witches, Macbeth finds himself in an unnatural dramatic world on the "foul and fair" day of the battle (I.iii.39). Things are not what they seem. After his first conclave with the witches, Macbeth is unable to determine whether the prophecy of the witches bodes "ill" or "good." He then begins to doubt reality itself as he states that "nothing is / But what it is not" (I.iii.141-142). The prophecy, of course, is true in the first sense but not what Macbeth takes it to be in the second. In like manner, the three predictions made to Macbeth in the first scene of Act IV seem to make him invincible; but the "woods" do march and Macbeth is slain by a man not ("naturally") born of woman.

Not only does an unnatural world overturn reality in Macbeth's experience, in Lady Macbeth's experience, this movement beyond nature is self-invoked. In an oft-cited speech, Lady Macbeth actively conjures up supernatural forces to change her into a creature without conscience or human (or "feminine") compassion.

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me, from the crown to the toe topful
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th' effect and it!
(I.v.40-47)

Lady Macbeth alters herself into a monster, "de-sexing" herself into an embodiment of evil akin to the demon goddess Hecate. As many scholars have pointed out, unlike Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff, Macbeth and his wife are childless; there is no succession of kings behind Macbeth as there is behind Banquo. Having shorn herself of the ability to generate an heir, Lady Macbeth undergoes an alienation from both her gender and, as discussed below, from her marriage to Macbeth.

The waking world of reality and the unnatural world of evil intermingle in the paranoid hallucinations and, most markedly, in the insomnia of Macbeth and of Lady Macbeth. After Duncan's murder, Macbeth hears that internal voice which commands him to "sleep no more" (II.ii.37). Restive to the end, Macbeth's insomnia is noted by his wife. She attempts to explain the more vivid and horrifying experiences that he undergoes, such as seeing Banquo's spectral effigy at the feast, by referring to natural causes, telling her husband that his vision stems from the fact that he lacks sleep. But then Lady Macbeth herself falls victim to a deep, somatic disorder. As the doctor who treats her insomnia is told, Lady Macbeth only begins to sleepwalk and to compulsively wash her hands when Macbeth is no longer present, the tyrant having taken to the field to stop Malcolm, Macduff, and their fellows from overturning his reign. In the end, Lady Macbeth enters into a limbo state of madness, sleepwalking between a horrible reality and a vision of the hell it portends.

The deterioration of Macbeth and of Lady Macbeth as individuals is closely paralleled by the collapse of their marital relationship. Oddly, among all of Shakespeare's married couples, the Macbeths of Act I and Act II show the highest degree of bonding and cooperative spirit. The very first time that we see Lady Macbeth, she is reading a letter from Macbeth prefaced by the fond salutation, "Dearest Partner of Greatnesse." There is in the first two acts of the play a mutual admiration between the two, a dual respect based on their shared conviction that the manly Macbeth is fit to be king, while the commanding Lady Macbeth is his natural consort. When Lady Macbeth is first told that Macbeth has executed their plan and killed the king, she cries out "My husband."

But a change occurs in the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in Act II of Shakespeare's play. Once Duncan has been dispatched, Lady Macbeth becomes increasingly unimportant to her husband. After the murder of the King, Macbeth begins to withdraw from his marriage to Lady Macbeth. It is significant that Macbeth does not convey the graphic details of the King's death to his wife and that he departs (wisely, in fact) from his instructions to leave the daggers of the king's guards behind. Moreover, he keeps his plot against Banquo and Fleance from his wife, and she has no role at all in the killing of Macduff's family. Indeed, following her ineffectual efforts to control Macbeth when he sees Banquo's ghost at the banquet, Lady Macbeth virtually disappears from the plot. Not only is Lady Macbeth no longer directing the action in the natural domain of the play, she is now excluded by her husband from partaking in either the natural or the supernatural progression ahead.

When we see her again, Lady Macbeth is virtually unrecognizable, a shaken shell of her former self. As noted above, critical opinion about Lady Macbeth has moved in the direction of seeing her as either a pathetic character or as redeemed by her own suicide, in the sense that it demonstrates her underlying humanity. What is truly pathetic, as opposed to monstrous, about Lady Macbeth of Act V is that she no longer has any role in her partnership with Macbeth. She has voluntarily relinquished her natural role as Macbeth's wife to mobilize him into action, and in the unnatural world into which she has entered, she is no match for the witches who have assumed the function that she once performed on behalf of her partnership with Macbeth. Pathetically,
Lady Macbeth yearns for the natural union that she had with her husband, for the role of nurturer and comforter, and that is no longer available to her. Lady Macbeth's last words are not expressions of guilt, but tender solicitous of care from her husband: "give me your hand … to bed, to bed, to bed" (V.i.66-68).

**Themes: Advanced Themes**

*Macbeth* is a complex study of evil and its corrupting influence on humanity. Some critics argue that Shakespeare adapted historical accounts of Macbeth to illustrate his larger view of evil's operation in the world. The particular evil that the protagonist commits has wide-spread consequences, causing a series of further evils. As a result, the tragedy is not fully resolved through the fallen hero's death but through the forces of good that ultimately correct all the evil Macbeth has unleashed. The witches, through their ambiguous prophecies, represent a supernatural power that introduces evil into *Macbeth*. Their equivocations—the intentional stating of half-truths—conceal the sinister nature of their predictions, and Macbeth does not consider the possibility that they are trying to deceive him. In fact, the Weird Sisters' attempts at misinformation succeed not only because they favorably interpret the hero's future but also because their revelations seem to come true almost immediately. Although inherently malevolent, the witches' prophecies do not necessarily signify the actual existence of evil but suggest instead the potential for evil in the world. The Weird Sisters themselves do not have the power to enact a diabolic course of events such as that which ensues in *Macbeth*; rather, their power lies in tempting humans like Macbeth to sin. When Macbeth succumbs to the temptation to commit murder, he himself is the active catalyst that unleashes evil upon the world. The evil, which initially manifests itself in Duncan's murder, not only disintegrates Macbeth's personal world but also expands until it corrupts all levels of creation, contaminating the family, the state, and the physical universe. For example, Macduff's family is murdered, Scotland is embroiled in a civil war, and during Duncan's assassination "the earth was feverous, and did shake" (II.iii.60).

Shakespeare's depiction of time is another central concern in *Macbeth*. Macbeth dislocates the passage of time—a process fundamental to humankind's existence—when he succumbs to evil and murders Duncan. Shakespeare uses this displacement as a key symbol in dramatizing the steady disintegration of the hero's world. Macbeth's evil actions initially interrupt the normal flow of time, but order gradually regains its proper shape and overpowers the new king, as demonstrated by his increasing guilt and sleeplessness. Ironically, the Weird Sisters can be seen as an element that contributes to the restoration of order. Although Macbeth disrupts the natural course of events by acting on the witches' early prophecies, their later predictions suggest that his power will shortly end. This premonition is apparent in the Birnam wood revelation; while Macbeth believes that the prediction insures his invulnerability, it really implies that his rule will soon expire. Some critics observe that different kinds of time interact in *Macbeth*. The most apparent form of time can be described as chronological. Chronological time establishes the sense of physical passage in the play, focusing on the succession of events that can be measured by clock, calendar, and the movement of the sun, moon, and stars. Another aspect of time, identified as providential, overarches the action of the entire play. Providential time is the divine ordering of events that is initially displaced by Macbeth's evil actions but which gradually overpowers him and reestablishes harmony in the world. Macbeth conceives of another kind of time that seems to defy cause and effect when he unsuccessfully attempts to reconcile his anticipation of the future with the memory of his ignoble actions. This dilemma initiates a period of inaction in the protagonist's life that culminates in his resigned acceptance of death as the inexorable passage of time. This confused displacement of time pervades the action of *Macbeth* until Malcolm and Macduff restore a proper sense of order at the end of the play.

Another important issue in *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's ambiguous treatment of gender and sex roles. In many instances, the playwright either inverts a character's conventional gender characteristics or divests the figure of them altogether. Lady Macbeth is perhaps the most obvious example of this dispossession. In Act I, scene v, she prepares to confront her husband by resolving to "unsex" herself, to suppress any supposed weakness
associated with her feminine nature so that she can give Macbeth the strength and determination to carry out Duncan's murder. After the king is killed, however, her feelings of guilt gradually erode her resolve, and she goes insane. Macbeth is perhaps the character most affected by the question of gender in the tragedy. From the beginning of the play, he is plagued by feelings of doubt and insecurity, which his wife attributes to "effeminate" weakness. Fearing that her husband does not have the resolve to murder Duncan, Lady Macbeth cruelly manipulates his lack of self-confidence by questioning his manhood. Some critics maintain that as a result of his wife's machinations, Macbeth develops a warped perspective of manliness, equating it with the less humanistic attribute of self-seeking aggression. The more the protagonist pursues his ideal understanding of manliness—first by murdering Duncan, then Banquo, and finally Macduff's family—the less humane he becomes. Commentators who subscribe to this reading of Macbeth's character argue that the ruthlessness with which he strives to obtain this perverted version of manhood ultimately separates him from the rest of humankind. Through his diminishing humaneness, the protagonist essentially forfeits all claims on humanity itself—a degeneration, he ultimately realizes, that renders meaningless his ideal of manliness.

Various image patterns support the sense of corruption and deterioration that pervades the dramatic action of *Macbeth*. Perhaps one of the most dominant groups is that of babies and breast-feeding. Infants symbolize pity throughout the play, and breast milk represents humanity, tenderness, sympathy, and natural human feelings, all of which have been debased by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's evil actions. Another set of images focuses on sickness and medicine, all of which occur, significantly, in the last three acts of the play after Macbeth has ascended the Scottish throne. These patterns are given greater depth through Shakespeare's graphic depiction of blood in the tragedy. The numerous references to blood not only provide Macbeth's ruthless actions with a visual dimension, they also underscore Scotland's degeneration after Macbeth murders Duncan and usurps the crown. Ironically, blood also symbolizes the purifying process by which Malcolm and Macduff—the restorers of goodness—purge the weakened country of Macbeth's villainy. Other major image patterns include sleep and sleeplessness, order versus disorder, and the contrast between light and darkness.
Characters

Characters: All Characters

Macbeth

Macbeth begins the play as a heroic and triumphant figure, the noble Thane of Glamis, a general in the Scottish army who has just defeated the insurgent King of Norway. As a reward for his valor and loyalty, King Duncan transfers the title of Thane of Cawdor to Macbeth. However, prior to receiving this news, Macbeth encounters the Three Weird Sisters, who greet him as the Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and future King of Scotland. Macbeth is initially wary of the witches’ prophecy, but after he discovers that he has been named Thane of Cawdor, his belief in their prophecy is cemented and his thoughts turn to how he might become king. From that point on, Macbeth sinks deeper into murder and treachery as he becomes a regicidal tyrant in the eyes of the people of Scotland. (Read extended character analysis for Macbeth.)

Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is Macbeth’s wife and “dearest partner of greatness.” At the start of the play, she is the more dominant figure in the marriage, viewing her husband as weak and lacking the necessary willpower to achieve their mutual ambitions. Upon receiving Macbeth’s letter about the witches’ prophecies, Lady Macbeth is thrilled by the prospect of becoming queen. She calls out to the “spirits” to “unsex” her and turn her “womanly” attributes into more masculine ones so that she might become “cruel” enough to murder King Duncan herself. However, after Duncan’s death, both Lady Macbeth’s sanity and power in her marriage begin to decline. By the start of act V, she is sleepwalking and hallucinating about having blood on her hands, with the court doctor's proclaiming that she would be better off with a priest than a physician. She ultimately takes her own life, and Macbeth laments that she died at a time when he is unable to mourn her properly. (Read extended character analysis for Lady Macbeth.)

Banquo

Banquo is a general in the Scottish army and Macbeth’s friend. He is with Macbeth when the witches deliver their prophecy. When he asks them to tell him about his own future, they inform him that though he will never be king, his children will be. Ever the loyal kinsman, Banquo refuses to assist Macbeth in his plot against the king and views the witches as evil beings. However, their prophecy with regards to Banquo’s children becoming kings is enough to pique Banquo’s curiosity, even as it puts him and his son, Fleance, within the dangerous territory of Macbeth’s ambition. Ultimately, Banquo dies in defense of his son, ensuring that his legacy continues at the cost of his own life. (Read extended character analysis for Banquo.)

Duncan

Duncan is the King of Scotland. He is characterized as a fair and wise king who is generous with his kinsmen and just with his people. Duncan awards Macbeth the title of Thane of Cawdor as a reward for his bravery in the battle against the King of Norway. However, despite the king’s virtues, the Macbeths murder Duncan in his sleep, sending Scotland into a spiral of chaos and disorder. (Read extended character analysis for Duncan.)
Macduff

Macduff is the Thane of Fife and the man who ultimately ends Macbeth’s reign of terror. Macduff is a loyal thane who lacks the ambition of both Banquo and Macbeth, instead working to support whomever he sees as the rightful king. He quickly grows suspicious of Macbeth after Duncan’s murder, refusing to attend Macbeth’s coronation. However, his own sense of honor blinds him to the danger in which he has left his family after his flight to England. After hearing that his family was massacred, Macduff vows revenge, going on to defeat Macbeth in combat and restore order to Scotland. (Read extended character analysis for Macduff.)

Malcolm

Malcolm is the eldest son of King Duncan and the rightful heir to the Scottish throne. Duncan officially names Malcolm as his heir in act I, scene IV, cutting off Macbeth’s prospects for ascending the throne. After discovering that their father has been murdered, Malcolm and his brother Donalbain decide to flee Scotland and take refuge in neighboring courts. Malcolm flees to England, where he forms an agreement with the King of England in order to retake the throne of Scotland from Macbeth. When Macduff arrives in England, Malcolm is initially mistrustful, but the two eventually become allies. At the end of the play, Malcolm and the English forces are victorious, and Malcolm prepares to set right the harms that Macbeth has inflicted on Scotland. (Read extended character analysis for Malcolm.)

The Witches

The witches, often referred to as the three “weird sisters,” are Macbeth’s dark and mysterious guides on his descent into evil and tyranny. The play opens with their premonition that “fair is foul, and foul is fair,” establishing their moral ambiguity and suggesting that, in the world of the play, things aren't always as they seem. When the witches first meet Banquo and Macbeth in act I, scene III, they are described as androgynous and “not like the inhabitants o’ the earth.” However, their prophecies prove fairer than their foul appearances portended, and, after becoming king, Macbeth seeks them out a second time. The witches deliver three more prophecies, lulling Macbeth into a false sense of security that ultimately brings about his downfall. (Read extended character analysis for the Witches.)

Minor Characters

In addition to the characters above, Shakespeare’s Macbeth includes a supporting cast of minor roles. For more information about these characters, read more about them on their own page.

Characters: Macbeth

Extended Character Analysis

Macbeth begins the play as a heroic and triumphant figure, the noble Thane of Glamis, a general in the Scottish army who has just defeated the insurgent King of Norway. As a reward for his valor and loyalty, King Duncan transfers the title of Thane of Cawdor to Macbeth. However, prior to receiving this news, Macbeth encounters the Three Weird Sisters, who greet him as the Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and future King of Scotland. Macbeth is initially wary of the witches’ prophecy, but after he discovers that he has been named Thane of Cawdor, his belief in their prophecy is cemented and his thoughts turn to how he might become king. From that point on, Macbeth sinks deeper into murder and treachery as he becomes a regicidal
tyrant in the eyes of the people of Scotland.

Macbeth is characterized primarily by ambition. Even before his thoughts turn to regicide, he is enraptured by the witches’ prophecies. His appointment as Thane of Cawdor only serves to stoke the fires of his ambition. He at first assumes that he will become king in the same fashion that he became Thane of Cawdor, but when Duncan names Malcolm as his successor, Macbeth’s ambition is left unsatisfied. However, rather than being content with his promotion to Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth becomes fixated on the loftier title of king.

Though his ambition is his chief drive, Macbeth also experiences moments of intense self-doubt and guilt. In act I, scene VII, Macbeth’s self-doubt leads him to call off the murder, only agreeing to go through with it after Lady Macbeth intervenes. His guilt grows with each villainous action he commits, compounding to the point where he feels trapped, unable to do anything other than accept his role as a villain. Macbeth begins the story as a soldier, a valiant warrior who fights his enemies with purpose and integrity. His descent into treachery and murder, with no just cause, rankle his more noble sensibilities. Though guilt is not enough to stave off Macbeth’s moral decay, it does serve to humanize him, adding emotional depth and conflict to a character who would otherwise be an irredeemable villain.

Macbeth’s moral decay can be interpreted in different ways. By one reading, unchecked ambition becomes a corrupting influence that transforms an otherwise good man into a brutal tyrant. Macbeth’s conscience is at war with his ambition, with ambition ultimately winning out when Macbeth commits regicide. By this reading, Macbeth is a tragic hero who is ultimately destroyed by his own ambition and faith in the witches’ prophecy. The witches and Lady Macbeth become the villains in Macbeth’s story, driving him to commit terrible acts in spite of his conscience. By the time Macbeth realizes that he has doomed himself, it is already too late, so he resigns himself to his chosen path. However, many critics argue that this interpretation minimizes Macbeth’s wickedness and portrays him as more virtuous than he really is.

By a different reading, Macbeth is an immoral villain from the start. Though he tries to talk himself out of the murder and maintain some semblance of honor, Macbeth is less concerned with Duncan’s welfare and more concerned with the prospect of personal failure. His excuses to Lady Macbeth focus more on what they stand to lose than on any elements of virtue, and he is easily swayed back to her cause. Some have even read Macbeth’s declaration that they will not go through with the murder as a means of testing Lady Macbeth’s resolve. By this reading, Macbeth is less a tragic hero and more an anti-hero, a character who pursues his own ends at the expense of others. Despite being named Thane of Cawdor purely on merit, Macbeth is not content to trust the witches’ prophecies to come true on their own. Instead, after Duncan declares Malcolm as his successor, Macbeth immediately considers regicide. His increasingly brutal actions, including ordering the murder of Macduff’s wife and children, suggest a nearly limitless capacity for cruelty. Perhaps the most damning evidence of all is that, unlike most tragic heroes, Macbeth commits his sins with full acknowledgement of his own immorality, unable to justify their necessity beyond the fact that they satisfy his ambition.

An additional interpretation is that Macbeth is neither a tragic hero nor an anti-hero, but rather a man struggling against fate and the natural order. In act I, scene II, the sergeant who reports the outcome of the battle to Duncan describes Macbeth as “disdaining fortune” by overcoming the Norwegian forces. Fate, especially when viewed from a religious standpoint, is often equated with the natural order. By contrast, the witches are equated with unnatural, “foul” forces. Macbeth willingly accepts the witches’ prophecies as fate because, unlike the natural order and hierarchy within Scotland, they appeal to his ambition. By this reading, Macbeth becomes an agent of the unnatural, disdaining fate in favor of dark prophecies. However, by doing so, he becomes an unnatural figure himself, a disruption that must be purged for the natural order to continue.

Macbeth’s story comes full circle in the final act. Just as Macbeth had been hailed as a hero for defeating the insurgent King of Norway, Macduff is hailed as a hero for defeating the tyrannical King Macbeth. Macbeth
seems to recognize the futility of his actions in act V, scene V when he laments that life is a tale “told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Whether he plays the role of tragic hero, anti-hero, or defier of fate, Macbeth’s descent into damnation means, in his own words, “nothing.” However, the ending of the play is open to interpretation. By one reading, Macbeth is struck down as a villain, ending his reign of terror as the monster he has made himself into. The ending can also be read in a redemptive light, whereby Macbeth returns to the battlefield as the soldier he was meant to be and dies honorably, finally free of his conscience.

**Characters: Lady Macbeth**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Lady Macbeth is Macbeth’s wife and “dearest partner of greatness.” At the start of the play, she is the more dominant figure in the marriage, viewing her husband as weak and lacking the necessary willpower to achieve their mutual ambitions. Upon receiving Macbeth’s letter about the witches’ prophecies, Lady Macbeth is thrilled by the prospect of becoming queen. She calls out to the “spirits” to “unsex” her and turn her “womanly” attributes into more masculine ones so that she might become “cruel” enough to murder King Duncan herself. However, after Duncan’s death, both Lady Macbeth’s sanity and power in her marriage begin to decline. By the start of act V, she is sleepwalking and hallucinating about having blood on her hands, with the court doctor's proclaiming that she would be better off with a priest than a physician. She ultimately takes her own life, and Macbeth laments that she died at a time when he is unable to mourn her properly.

Lady Macbeth is at odds with her gender. She frequently emasculates her husband as a means of manipulating him and seems to despise all things feminine, perceiving femininity as a weakness. In act I, scene V, Lady Macbeth rejects everything to do with femininity and motherhood, calling on the spirits to “unsex” her, replace her breast milk with poison, and thicken her blood so that she can no longer menstruate. In act I, scene VII, she describes a brutal infanticide, saying that she would gladly dash “the brains out” of her own child if it meant keeping an oath.

In the context of gender roles in Jacobean England, Lady Macbeth would have been considered an unconventional, even unnatural, woman for rejecting maternal compassion in favor of masculine violence and ambition. Her power over her husband and her role in his regicide align her with the witches, who are also described as unnatural and androgynous. Combined with her summoning of “spirits” to help her accomplish her goals, Lady Macbeth is sometimes considered a fourth witch.

By reading Lady Macbeth as a fourth witch, her villainy is cemented and she becomes a corrupting influence. Just as the three “weird sisters” spur Macbeth towards his downfall, Lady Macbeth bullies her husband into the murder, alternatingly stoking his ambition and goading him by insulting his masculinity. In this interpretation, Lady Macbeth is the true villain of the play, spurring her otherwise good husband to commit terrible evils. Even without the more supernatural elements, Lady Macbeth is often cast as a corrupting force whose ambition—unnatural and unfeminine by Jacobean standards—leads to her husband’s downfall.

However, by a different reading, Lady Macbeth is a woman whose dissatisfaction with her expected gender role has resulted in a loathing of all things feminine. Lady Macbeth is as ambitious, cunning, and cutthroat as her husband, if not more so, but she has no outlet for her feelings and energies. She cannot don armor and ride into battle, currying favor with the king. Instead, she must stay at home and live vicariously through Macbeth. The witches’ prophecy represents an opportunity for her to satisfy her own needs and participate in the action. Her enthusiasm at the prospect of killing Duncan by her own hand suggests a desire for power and control over men that she has previously only been able to exercise within her marriage.
Lady Macbeth’s madness—and the question of where it stems from—is also open to interpretation. During her sleepwalking episode in act V, scene I, Lady Macbeth makes several statements that suggest possible causes. The first of these is guilt over her involvement in Duncan’s murder. She hallucinates that her hand is covered with blood; that she is unable to wash away the stain no matter how hard she scrubs. By this reading, Lady Macbeth is driven mad by remorse for her actions and possibly remorse for her husband’s subsequent actions.

However, by a different reading, it is not until Macbeth orders the deaths of Lady Macduff and her children that Lady Macbeth truly goes mad. Though still brought on by guilt, her madness is now based in her lack of control over events. During Duncan’s murder, Lady Macbeth was in control of the plan and had to support her husband. However, after the murders are completed, Macbeth begins acting on his own, first by ordering the deaths of Banquo and Fleance and then by massacring Macduff’s family.

On a more thematic level, Lady Macbeth’s madness can be read as a restoration of the natural order. Just as Macbeth must die so that Malcolm can ascend to the throne, Lady Macbeth must also die, but not before she is forced back into a more traditionally feminine role. Using this interpretation, Lady Macbeth’s madness is a punishment for her transgressive ambition. Forced to relive the night of the murder instead of sleeping, she grows enfeebled, referring to her hand as “little” and needing to be taken care of. As opposed to her dominant, masculine presence in the first three acts, her madness renders her weak and hysterical, characteristics that Lady Macbeth initially derided her “unmanly” husband for exhibiting.

**Characters: Banquo**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Banquo is a general in the Scottish army and Macbeth’s friend. He is with Macbeth when the witches deliver their prophecy. When he asks them to tell him about his own future, they inform him that though he will never be king, his children will be. Ever the loyal kinsman, Banquo refuses to assist Macbeth in his plot against the king and views the witches as evil beings. However, their prophecy with regards to Banquo’s children becoming kings is enough to pique Banquo’s curiosity, even as it puts him and his son, Fleance, within the dangerous territory of Macbeth’s ambition. Ultimately, Banquo dies in defense of his son, ensuring that his legacy continues at the cost of his own life.

Banquo is at first suspicious of the witches, believing them to be instruments of darkness. However, in act II, scene I, it is made clear that Banquo is not entirely without ambitions of his own. His dreams have been plagued by “cursed thoughts” to the point that he has to entrust his weapons to Fleance. The implication is that Banquo has also considered murdering Duncan. This interpretation is further supported by Banquo’s musings in act III, scene I, which seem to indicate a readiness to serve Macbeth and benefit from Macbeth’s foul deeds.

Banquo’s primary role in the play is as a foil to Macbeth. Macbeth and Banquo both hear tantalizing prophecies about the future that stoke their ambitions. However, while Macbeth turns to evil in order to make the prophecies come true, Banquo maintains enough personal integrity to resist temptation. Banquo is wary of Macbeth after hearing the prophecy, realizing that his own “cursed thoughts” with regards to Duncan are also plaguing Macbeth. Due to his knowledge of the witches’ prophecies, Banquo is among the first to suspect Macbeth of the murders. However, rather than telling his suspicions to the other Scottish lords, Banquo remains silent, indicating a degree of moral ambiguity. Banquo is too good of a man to kill his king, but he is not so good of a man that he can disdain such a tantalizing prophecy entirely.
The nature of Banquo’s ghost is up for interpretation. By one reading, the ghost is a literal manifestation of Banquo, come to haunt Macbeth for his part in Banquo’s murder. If the ghost is read as real, then its presence is Banquo’s way of reminding Macbeth that for all his treachery, Macbeth still sits on a “fruitless” and “barren” throne. It may also represent Banquo’s posthumous attempt to implicate Macbeth in the murders, as his ghost frightens Macbeth into confessing his guilt aloud before the assembled lords. However, the ghost is more commonly read as a manifestation of Macbeth’s fear and guilt over the murders and Fleance’s escape. That the ghost takes Macbeth’s seat showcases Macbeth’s own insecurity with regards to his kingship and childless marriage.

Regardless of whether the ghost is real or a figment of Macbeth’s imagination, it serves to highlight his deteriorating mental state. It also raises suspicions amongst the assembled lords, destabilizing Macbeth’s already tenuous rule. Although Duncan’s death shakes Macbeth, it is Banquo’s death that truly destabilizes him. Macbeth fears Banquo, because Banquo is ultimately a better man than Macbeth; Banquo was confronted with the same temptation and chose the path of loyalty and goodness, refusing to betray his king as Macbeth did.

**Characters: Duncan**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Duncan is the King of Scotland. He is characterized as a fair and wise king who is generous with his kinsmen and just with his people. Duncan awards Macbeth the title of Thane of Cawdor as a reward for his bravery in the battle against the King of Norway. However, despite the king’s virtues, the Macbeths murder Duncan in his sleep, sending Scotland into a spiral of chaos and disorder.

Duncan is portrayed as a fatherly figure, and Lady Macbeth remarks that he looked too much like her father for her to go through with killing him herself. When addressing Macbeth and Banquo after the battle against the traitorous Thane of Cawdor, he employs plant metaphors that symbolize his desire to cultivate loyal and worthy subjects. This diction serves to position Duncan as a gentle and attentive figure who genuinely cares for his thanes and subjects.

Duncan’s emotional speaking style and apparent compassion contrast with Lady Macbeth’s concept of masculinity. Both Duncan and Malcolm, the rightful kings in the play, display moments of genuine compassion and warmth, a contrast to Lady Macbeth’s insistence that cruelty and cunning are the central masculine traits. Lady Macbeth’s attempt to undermine what it means to be an honorable man clashes with the reality that the good rulers display all of the traits she dismisses as weak and “unmanly.”

However, for all of Duncan’s virtues, his primary flaw is his poor judgement of character. Macbeth wins the title of Thane of Cawdor after defeating the previous Thane of Cawdor in battle. The very defection of the previous Thane of Cawdor shows that Duncan has been betrayed in the past and foreshadows Macbeth’s subsequent term in that role. However, Duncan is unable to discern the threat that Macbeth represents, instead describing Inverness as having a “pleasant seat.” Duncan is trusting, believing that his own goodness and generosity is enough to satisfy the ambitions of his attendant lords.

In a setting where kings are thought to be appointed by divine rule, subject to none other than their god, regicide is considered sacrilegious. Furthermore, Duncan is described in divine language, said to have “silver skin” and “golden blood,” reinforcing his near-divinity. Due to Macbeth’s admission that Duncan has been a good king, Duncan’s death lacks any sense of righteousness. The religious contexts of kingship combine with the unjustified murder to make Macbeth’s regicide feel even more unnatural.
Characters: Macduff

Extended Character Analysis

Macduff is the Thane of Fife and the man who ultimately ends Macbeth’s reign of terror. Macduff is a loyal thane who lacks the ambition of both Banquo and Macbeth, instead working to support whomever he sees as the rightful king. He quickly grows suspicious of Macbeth after Duncan’s murder, refusing to attend Macbeth’s coronation. However, his own sense of honor blinds him to the danger in which he has left his family after his flight to England. After hearing that his family was massacred, Macduff vows revenge, going on to defeat Macbeth in combat and restore order to Scotland.

Macduff acts as a foil to Macbeth, with his honesty, humility, and loyalty contrasting with Macbeth’s pride and ambition. If Macbeth is a “devilish” agent of the unnatural, then Macduff is an agent of the natural order, described by Lennox in act III, scene VI as a “holy angel.” Macduff is a selfless patriot, sacrificing his family, his status, and his own safety for the sake of restoring order to Scotland. He refuses to tolerate corruption, preferring to forsake Scotland entirely rather than allow a corrupt king to sit on the throne.

The thought of claiming the kingship for himself never crosses Macduff’s mind, highlighting his lack of personal ambition. His triumph over Macbeth in act V, scene VII represents the restoration of the natural order, as Malcolm, the rightful heir to Duncan’s throne, prepares to reclaim Scotland. The shadow of Macbeth’s reign is dispelled, and Macduff’s revenge for his family’s murder is complete. By one interpretation, Macduff is the true hero of the play, having far more heroic qualities and motivations than Macbeth. However, since Macbeth is the focus of the story, Macduff is instead an anti-villain to Macbeth’s anti-hero.

In addition to being victimized by Macbeth, Macduff is also impacted by the witches. It is their prediction—that Macbeth must “beware Macduff”—that leads to the slaughter of Macduff’s family. If Macbeth does not kill Macduff’s family, Macduff does not seek Macbeth out on the battlefield. However, Macduff is the man not of “woman born” who is destined to kill Macbeth, infusing the events with a degree of supernatural premeditation.

Macduff’s emotional reaction to finding out his family’s massacre calls into question the Macbeths’ concept of what it means to be a man. When Malcolm tells him to “dispute” his grievances like a man in act VI, scene III, Macduff responds that he must also “feel it like a man.” Macduff is normally quiet and stoic, but his reactions to the murders of both Duncan and his family suggest a rich emotional interior and contradicts Lady Macbeth’s assertion that kindness and grief are “unmanly.”

Characters: Malcolm

Extended Character Analysis

Malcolm is the eldest son of King Duncan and the rightful heir to the Scottish throne. Duncan officially names Malcolm as his heir in act I, scene IV, cutting off Macbeth’s prospects for ascending the throne. After discovering that their father has been murdered, Malcolm and his brother Donalbain decide to flee Scotland and take refuge in neighboring courts. Malcolm flees to England, where he forms an agreement with the King of England in order to retake the throne of Scotland from Macbeth. When Macduff arrives in England, Malcolm is initially mistrustful, but the two eventually become allies. At the end of the play, Malcolm and the English forces are victorious, and Malcolm prepares to set right the harms that Macbeth has inflicted on Scotland.
Malcolm’s test for Macduff establishes both his love for his country and his intelligence. Rather than immediately trusting a visiting Scottish noble, Malcolm instead tests him by claiming to be a lecherous, greedy, and dishonest man who would be an even worse ruler than Macbeth. Upon seeing Macduff’s dismayed reaction, Malcolm is able to trust him, ascertaining that Macduff cares more about Scotland than petty revenge.

Malcolm also shows his personal nobility and leadership abilities when he helps Macduff direct his righteous anger over the murder of his family at the proper target. Unlike Macbeth, who tends to use people for his own gain, Malcolm puts effort into caring for his allies and genuinely mourns those lost in the battle against Macbeth. His speech at the end of act V, scene VII sees him rewarding the thanes who were loyal to him and attempting to set right everything that Macbeth disrupted.

Thematically, Malcolm represents the natural order. He is the rightful heir to Duncan’s throne and proves himself to be a prudent, capable, and virtuous man. His absence from Scotland coincides with Macbeth’s unnatural reign, and his return at the end of the play allows Scotland to begin healing. He intends to call home all of those whom Macbeth banished, and he decides to adopt an English custom by naming his thanes “Earls,” inviting change and prosperity to a country that has suffered under a narrow-minded tyrant.

In 11th-century Scotland, kings were thought to have a divine right to rule, meaning that Malcolm’s ascension also represents the reinstatement of divine order. Unlike Macbeth, who seizes the throne through murder and treachery, Malcolm wins the throne righteously and through fair combat. Malcolm’s speech at the end of act V, scene VII leaves Scotland, and the audience, with the sense that everything is going to be set right, further emphasizing the unnaturalness of Macbeth’s reign.

**Characters: The Witches**

**Extended Character Analysis**

The witches, often referred to as the three “weird sisters,” are Macbeth’s dark and mysterious guides on his descent into evil and tyranny. The play opens with their premonition that “fair is foul, and foul is fair,” establishing their moral ambiguity and suggesting that, in the world of the play, things aren't always as they seem. When the witches first meet Banquo and Macbeth in act I, scene III, they are described as androgynous and “not like the inhabitants o’ the earth.” However, their prophecies prove fairer than their foul appearances portended, and, after becoming king, Macbeth seeks them out a second time. The witches deliver three more prophecies, lulling Macbeth into a false sense of security that ultimately brings about his downfall.

The essential nature of the witches is a source of speculation. By one interpretation, they are agents of evil, manipulating Macbeth into committing sinful acts. In Jacobean England, witches were viewed as religious traitors who had turned their back on the Christian God in favor of devilish practices. In *Macbeth*, the witches appeal to Macbeth’s pride and greed, two of the cardinal sins in Christian theology, leading him to murder the divinely appointed King Duncan and disrupt the natural order of succession. Furthermore, their potions contain a variety of ghastly ingredients, many of which are associated with the wicked or damned. By reading the witches as agents of evil, Macbeth’s fall from grace is the product of satanic intervention. The witches are corrupting forces, joined in their dark machinations by Lady Macbeth, the four of them facilitating the
downfall of an otherwise good man.

However, the witches can also be read as agents of chaos. They refer to the battle with the Norwegian forces as a “hurlyburly,” or a confused state, highlighting a lack of regard for human life and the order it requires. Furthermore, their second set of prophecies to Macbeth are all designed to be misleading. By lulling Macbeth into a false sense of security, they steer him towards his fall, which suggests that they don’t necessarily want Macbeth to succeed. Instead, they seem bent on causing confusion and chaos, which is further reinforced by Hecate’s declaration that “security is mortals’ chiefest enemy.” By this reading, the witches seek to cause chaos amongst mortals, offering Macbeth fuel for his ambitions so that he can disrupt the natural order of the world.

The witches have also been associated with the mythical fates of Norse and Greco-Roman mythology, allowing for an additional interpretation of them as agents of destiny. By this reading, the witches are a more passive presence, telling Macbeth only what is already inevitable. Rather than harboring a specific motive, the witches are simply a neutral, amoral force of prophecy. The witches never directly interfere with the events of the play, and they never tell Macbeth to do anything, instead delivering statements of fact about the future. It is ultimately Macbeth’s hand that murders Duncan, kills Banquo, and slaughters Macduff’s family. This reading positions Macbeth as the true evil within the play, the immoral and disloyal thane who uses the predictions of fate to justify his own murderous ambitions.

**Characters: Minor Characters**

**Minor Characters: Fleance**

Fleance is Banquo’s son. After Macbeth sends murderers after Banquo and Fleance, Banquo fights off the murderers while Fleance flees. In Shakespeare’s source material, the legendary semi-historical accounts of the Holinshed Chronicles, Fleance eventually goes on to sire a son who returns to Scotland and begins the Stuart line of monarchs. King James I of England, Shakespeare’s patron, was a Stuart, and many scholars have speculated that the play’s gracious portrayal of Banquo was meant to flatter the king.

**Minor Characters: Ross**

Ross is a Scottish thane who serves as a messenger throughout the play. Ross first appears in act I, scene II, when he reports to Duncan about Macbeth and Banquo’s victory over the Norwegian forces. He later defects to Malcolm’s cause after it becomes increasingly clear that Macbeth is a tyrant. Ross’s role as a messenger is often used to introduce information about events that happen offstage, such as when he reports about the deaths of Macduff’s family and Young Siward.

**Minor Characters: Donalbain**

Donalbain is Duncan’s younger son and Malcolm’s brother. After his father’s murder, he flees to Ireland, hoping that separating from his brother will safeguard him. Macbeth spreads the rumor that Malcolm and Donalbain were responsible for their father’s death, using their hasty escape as evidence of their guilt.
Minor Characters: Hecate

In ancient Greek mythology, Hecate is the goddess of witchcraft. She is presented as the queen of the witches, and she chastises the three “weird sisters” for speaking to Macbeth without her. The three weird sisters seem to fear Hecate, remarking nervously about her “angerly” expression and hastening to do what she asks. Hecate devises the plan to lull Macbeth into a false sense of security by issuing misleading prophecies in act IV, scene I, claiming that “security is mortals’ chieffest enemy.”

There is controversy surrounding whether Hecate was included in the original manuscript of the play or whether she was added in a later edition. Some Shakespearean scholars believe that a different poet is responsible for the scenes featuring Hecate, citing their incongruous tone and verse structure as evidence.

Minor Characters: Siward

Siward is the English Earl of Northumberland and Malcolm’s uncle. He leads the army that Malcolm uses to reclaim Scotland from Macbeth. Siward is a stoic man who values honor and courage. When he hears that his son died in battle, his primary concern is whether his son died an honorable death. When he hears that his son’s wounds were on his front rather than on his back, he says that he could not “wish [Young Siward] to a fairer death” and refuses to mourn him further.

Minor Characters: The Doctor

The Doctor is called in to assess Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking. Upon hearing her talk in her sleep, he becomes convinced that her malady is not physical, but spiritual. He suggests that the only cure for what ails Lady Macbeth, and Macbeth himself, is to confess to a priest.

Minor Characters: Lady Macduff

Lady Macduff is Macduff’s wife. She loves her children and is not afraid to challenge her husband’s decisions, which is evident when she criticizes Macduff’s decision to flee to England. After the witches tell Macbeth to fear Macduff, Macbeth sends murderers to Macduff’s home. The murderers kill Lady Macduff and all of her children, which gives Macduff great grief when he hears the news in England.

Lady Macduff is most often read as a foil for Lady Macbeth due to her status as a loving wife and mother. Though she is outspokenly critical of her husband’s decisions, she does not mock him or insult him. She also worries for herself and her children in Macduff’s absence, highlighting her compassion and sensibility. In addition to foiling Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff’s murder is also used to reinforced Macbeth’s villainy and descent into true tyranny.

Minor Characters: Lennox, Menteith, Angus, Caithness

Lennox, Menteith, Angus, and Caithness are Scottish thanes who desert Macbeth when Malcolm’s forces arrive. Lennox begins the play in the company of King Duncan and is an insecure statesman. However, after Duncan’s death and Macbeth’s ascension, he quickly becomes suspicious. In act III, scene VI, Lennox indicates his support for Malcolm and Macduff’s plan, noting all of the “strangely borne” events around Scotland. The desertion of Lennox and the other Scottish lords emphasizes just how poor of a ruler Macbeth is.
Minor Characters: Murderers

The three murderers are hired by Macbeth to kill Banquo and Fleance. They were originally angry with Macbeth, but Macbeth convinces them that Banquo is the true cause of their misfortune. They successfully murder Banquo, but Fleance escapes, leaving open the possibility that the witches’ prophecies will come true.
Analysis

Macbeth's plot centers around questions of power, ambition, and murder. Its main character, Macbeth, is a villainous protagonist. Upon hearing a prophesy that he will become king, Macbeth endeavors to usurp the crown. This decisions, which leads to further murders and tyrannical misrule, ultimately results in Macbeth's own destruction.

The play provides powerful insight into human psychology. Its characters are not static (most certainly not in the case of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth), and we see the effects of the Macbeths' murderous ambition unfold across the play. It's worth noting that, before Macbeth murders Duncan, he suffers a crisis of conscience, after which Lady Macbeth exhorts him to go through with the plan. However, once Macbeth has murdered Duncan and committed to his ambition to be king, he engineers a murder attempt on Banquo to secure his dynastic ambitions against potential rivals. Later still, Macbeth will order the murder of Lady Macduff and her children. Duncan's murder is only the opening salvo to a bloodthirsty reign; once Macbeth has committed himself, he only sinks deeper into bloodlust and single-minded ambition. Meanwhile, Lady Macbeth—his wife and coconspirator—is driven insane out of guilt for her role in Duncan's death; near the end of the play, she kills herself as a result.

This play is notable, too, for Shakespeare's use of character foils. The most prominent of these is Macduff, who occupies a similar role under Malcolm as Macbeth once did under Duncan (as the king's closest supporter). However, Macduff is loyal, unlike the murderous Macbeth, and Macduff subordinates himself to the good of Scotland, whereas Macbeth aims to dominate it. Ultimately, Macduff is described as a paragon of morality, in stark contrast to his villainous adversary. However, with this stated, these two characters are also closely tied together within the action of the play—not only through Macbeth's murder of Macduff's family, but also through the machinations of fate itself. In addition to Macduff, one can also point toward Malcolm as another effective foil to Macbeth: here we have the usurper faced by the rightful heir to the throne, and in the end, tyranny gives way to rule by virtue.

Analysis: Act I Commentary

Scene i: In what is perhaps the most attention-grabbing opening scene of all of Shakespeare's plays, we are introduced to the Weird Sisters. The witches (as they are known) would have been considered by the Elizabethans to be human representatives of supernatural or dark forces. The thunder and lightening used to mark their entrance emphasises their "other worldliness." Graymalkin, a cat, and Paddock, a toad, are mentioned as their special accomplices, as would be dogs, rats, and spiders. This association of animals and insects with horror and evil is still evident in our Halloween decorations and scary movies.

The stage direction gives no indication of where the scene takes place, and the first word, "When," indicates that time rather than place will be a major motif of the play. Although the events in Shakespeare's original source for the play, Holinshedd's Chronicles, cover a ten year period, the play compresses the action so that events quickly follow each other.

The sing-song meter of the lines adds to the witches' mystery and underlines the effect that this opening "spell" will cast over the play. With all this "hurly burly," it is easy to miss a crucial piece of information: the witches will meet Macbeth on the heath at sunset. Why? What do they want with him?
Prophecies are used in Shakespeare's plays for two reasons: (1) to alert the audience to what will definitely happen, and (2) to alert the audience to what may or may not happen. Either way, this playwriting technique sets up the debate of whether characters are fated to meet to their ends or whether they have free choice. Here, however, the audience is only aware that the witches will meet Macbeth. The atmosphere of thunder, lightening, "fog and filthy air" imply that it will not be a good meeting.

As if all this were not enough, this opening scene has thirteen lines!

**Scene ii:** As predicted by the witches, a battle opens this scene. The king, Duncan, and his son, Malcolm, receive a report on the battle with the rebel, Macdonald, from the Captain. The King's language, however, is deceptively simple. He judges from the blood on the Captain that the man "can report/…of the revolt/ the newest state" (1.2.1-3). Duncan is thus established as a man who draws his conclusions from appearances. Malcolm, on the other hand, seems to put his trust in loyalty and tradition: "This is the sergeant/who like a good and hardy soldier fought/'Gainst my captivity" (1.2.3-5). When the bleeding Captain is questioned by Duncan about Macbeth and Banquo, two of his thanes (lords), he says that the two men "doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe" (1.2.38).

The Thane of Ross (known simply as Ross) and his companion, Angus, enter the scene to confirm the report of the Captain, adding that the Thane of Cawdor (another rebel) is defeated. Since a thane received his lands from the king and owed his loyalty directly to the king, the actions of the Thane of Cawdor is a serious offence punishable by death. Duncan not only orders this punishment immediately, but also awards the title, Thane of Cawdor, to Macbeth for his services to the crown.

Thus, the witches' vague prediction, "when the battle's lost and won", is enacted before the audience who now knows about Macbeth's promotion before he does. This knowledge will be especially important for the scene that follows. Here and now, however, it seems a very normal thing for a king to reward "noble" (1.2.66) Macbeth's military service with a promotion. Yet, nagging in the back of the mind is the fact that the meeting of the witches with Macbeth is close at hand. What do they want with him? What will happen next?.

**Scene iii:** Like scene 1, this scene opens with a peal of thunder and the appearance of the Three Witches. Here the audience receives an explanation of what the 'unnatural hags' have been up to since last saw them. The Second Witch has been 'killing swine' (1.3.2), while the First Witch is plotting revenge against a sailor's wife who had refused to share her chestnuts. While the three give many details about just what it is they plan to do to the sailor, Shakespeare is cleverly hinting at the limits of their power. The witches plan to torment the man with buffeting winds, sleeplessness, starvation, and a faulty compass. All these misfortunes are natural events and do not directly cause death. The limit to the witches' power is stated clearly: 'his bark cannot be lost' (1.3.24). Although the witches can inflict malice, it is the sailor's choices in dealing with them that will determine whether his ship sinks.

Immediately following is Macbeth's and Banquo's entrance. We only know the meeting is on the heath in the fog from Act One, scene one. The placement of the entrance here emphasises the limits of the witches' power over Macbeth and Banquo. The veracity of the prophecies that follow depend on two factors: (1) Macbeth is already Thane of Glamis and does not know that Duncan has made him Thane of Cawdor; (2) Macbeth alone can choose the means to make the leap from 'Thane of Cawdor' to 'King hereafter' (1.3.48, 49).

Banquo reinforces this free will to choose in his lines 'If you can look into the seeds of time/ And say which grain will grow and which will not' (1.3.58-59). The prophecy for Banquo, 'Lesser than Macbeth, and greater./ Not so happy, yet much happier./ Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none' (1.3.65-67) does not mention titles for Banquo, but rather intangible aspirations such as greatness and happiness which can be achieved by any man. The audience, however, knows that Macbeth's prophecy will soon be confirmed.
The witches disappear without further explanation, but they have made a deep impression on Macbeth, one that shows his initial belief in the prophecies: 'Would they had stayed' (1.3.82), followed by his realisation that Banquo's children will be kings. We will learn later that while Macbeth is childless, Banquo does have a son, so that while Macbeth will be king, he will not be able to pass on his regency.

Ross and Angus enter at this point to confirm that Macbeth is now Thane of Cawdor. At first he does not believe the two messengers, but once the events, 'treasons capital, confessed and proved' (1.3.115), are logically explained, Macbeth accepts that it is all in fulfilment of the prophecy. The one sticking point is the prophecy for Banquo. Banquo, however, tells Macbeth that such a vague pronouncement though containing an element of truth, will be harmful in the long run. Macbeth is lost in thought, debating with himself about whether the prophecies are bad or good. Realising that he can only be King by murdering Duncan, Macbeth decides that 'chance may crown me,/ Without my stir' (1.3.143-144). Technically, murder is the only choice that Macbeth can make to fulfil his prophecy, but he relinquishes an active role, blaming chance for any such treasonous thoughts. The scene ends with Banquo's agreeing to discuss the witches with Macbeth when they have both had time to think about it.

Such a discussion, however, will be unnecessary for Macbeth. Being made Thane of Cawdor has been sufficient proof for Macbeth that he will indeed be King whatever action he decides to take. Furthermore, Macbeth says that the witches have told him 'Two truths' (1.3.127) when in reality, he has heard only one. Clearly, on a subconscious level, Macbeth had already thought about killing Duncan and now has made the decision, despite pangs of conscience.

Scene iv: This scene opens with a second-hand report of Cawdor's death, which serves to confirm once more Macbeth's promotion. Duncan then offers a profound statement:

There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face:
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust. (1.4.11-14)

Duncan, whom we have seen makes judgements from appearances, apparently acknowledges his fault. However, is he speaking about Cawdor or Macbeth? Even though the King realises he failed to identify Cawdor as a traitor, he will also fail to see the treachery in his new favourite. And at this point, as Macbeth enters, this short-sightedness is all too visible in his telling Macbeth that the King owes him more than he can pay.

Curiously, Duncan uses this moment to declare his eldest son, Malcolm, Prince of Cumberland and heir to the throne. After inviting the King to stay at his castle, Macbeth makes another treacherous choice: if he is to be king, 'the Prince of Cumberland... is a step/ On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,/ For in my way it lies' (1.4.48-50). After Macbeth, Duncan praises Banquo as 'true, worthy' and 'valiant' (1.4.54).

Though the scene is only 58 lines long, structurally it is a brilliant sketch of the play. It opens with the old order (Duncan), continues with what will become the new order (Macbeth), and ends with the future of Scotland (Banquo). In addition, the scene shows the weakness of Duncan, the determination of Macbeth, and the quiet fealty of Banquo as interdependent links to each other and the prophecies. Psychologically, the scene also sets the stage for the entrance of the first woman in the play, Lady Macbeth. What will her reaction be to the royal visit?

Scene v: Arguably the most popular Shakespeare role for an actress, Lady Macbeth is introduced in this scene. Ironically, her first words are hers, but her husband's, contained in a letter which she begins with 'They' (1.5.1). Is Macbeth telling her about Ross and Angus, the soldiers in the battle, the King and his court, or
someone else? It all becomes clear very quickly, when he writes 'they made themselves into air' (1.5.5). Not only has Macbeth devoted the main part of his letter to a discussion of the witches, but it is also that part which has captured Lady Macbeth's attention.

But there are many other things going on here. Macbeth quotes the prophecy, 'All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter' (1.3.49-50) as 'Hail, King that shall be'. Such a misquote not only alters the words that the witches had used, but also alters their significance. To Macbeth, he was addressed as 'King' and is determined to be so. He also states that 'This I thought good to deliver thee', indicating (1) that he has decided that the prophecies are good; and (2) whatever happens, Lady Macbeth will also profit from it.

By addressing his wife as 'my dearest partner of greatness' (1.5.11-12), Macbeth opens a window on his marriage. At an historical time when women were more prized for the political and financial advantage they brought to a marriage, these two are clearly equals. As such, they would present a unified front in the quest for the crown. However, Lady Macbeth betrays this unity in her next lines. She reveals that she thinks her husband is too weak to follow through on what is required to obtain 'the golden round' (1.5.29). Lady Macbeth has no problem believing the prophecy which she has heard second-hand and which is misquoted. She is determined to convince her husband that 'fate and metaphysical aid' (1.5.30) are the true ways to the murder of Duncan and the crown.

When her reverie is interrupted by news of the King's imminent arrival, she cannot believe her luck. Now she can effect her plan for her husband's further promotion. She calls on the dark powers to 'unsex' (1.5.42) her and kill any feminine feelings of compassion and remorse in her. Her speech is littered with references to evil: 'murdering monsters' (49); 'thick night' (51); 'dunest smoke of hell' (52).

Contrary to Macbeth, Lady Macbeth has already formulated the means of Duncan's death. She further greets her husband with 'Great Glamis! Worthy Cawdor!/ Greater than both' (1.5.55-56), demonstrating that in her mind, she sees him as King. Assuring her husband that she has the situation in hand, Lady Macbeth advise Macbeth that he must be careful of how he appears to the King, showing us that she too knows he judges from appearances.

The scene ends with Macbeth wanting to discuss her plan further and with Lady Macbeth already in motion. Is Macbeth re-thinking the prophecies or is he truly weak as his wife has described him? There seems to be an element of hope that Macbeth, the great soldier, may have had time on the trip home to re-consider his course of action more carefully. Yet, his wife too has considered hers.

Scene vi: Duncan, his son Malcolm, and the court arrive at Inverness, Macbeth's castle. As we have come to expect, the King senses no danger and comments on how good it is to arrive at such a sweet-smelling place, far away from the gun-powder smoke and blood-soaked soil of battlefields. As if to agree with Lady Macbeth's advice to Macbeth in the preceding scene ['Look the innocent flower, But be the serpent under't' (1.5.66-67)], the castle dons the appearance of a safe haven, an image furthered by unaware Banquo.

The preliminaries continue between the unwary King and the future murderess. Although it may seem unnecessary, the scene carefully establishes Duncan as a guest of a than from whom he should expect not only duty and loyalty, but also thoughtfulness and consideration under the rules of hospitality. These rules, dating back as far as ancient Greece, dictated that a guest was entitled to the full graciousness of his host, paramount of which was safety and good rest. Duncan will get neither of these from the Macbeths.

Scene vii: During the feasting of his guest, Macbeth leaves the table and takes a moment to consider the consequences of his proposed murder of Duncan. He ponders the effects of assassination, realising that if regicide were the end result, all would be well; however, assassination creates a precedent for his own assassination and makes a martyr out of the one assassinated. Macbeth knows without a doubt the two
considerations shown in 1.5, that he is a thane and Duncan is a guest in his house. Even with these cautions, he concedes that his 'vaulting ambition' (1.7.27) drives him on.

Lady Macbeth comes to find her husband when Duncan asks for him and Macbeth tells her he will not kill the King. As she had predicted, she finds him weakened in his resolve. She chides him sternly and repeats her plan to stab Duncan and blame his guards, covering every eventuality. Macbeth, convinced once more, praises his wife's 'undaunted mettle' (1.7.73), and the scene and the Act end.

With clear explanation of the murder plot, the audience now has all the information it needs to understand the rest of the play: the personalities of Duncan, Macbeth, Banquo, Lady Macbeth, and the Witches; the motif of fate versus free-will; the politics of good and evil. It remains to be seen how Macbeth will be as a King and how Banquo will become the father of kings. Also to be revealed is what will happen to Malcolm, the Witches, and Lady Macbeth.

In seven scenes (also a magical number), we have watched Macbeth rise from Thane of Glamis to Thane of Cawdor, with the promise of kingship in his future. We have learned that given a moral choice, he will choose that which is most advantageous to him and his ambition, a true Machiavellian. Can such a man gain and retain political power?

Analysis: Act II Commentary

Scene i: By now the audience is anxious to find out how the Macbeths' murder plan will work, but Shakespeare continues to build the suspense. In this scene we meet Fleance (Flay-ahns), Banquo'' young son. Both father and son are restless and Macbeth too cannot sleep. The time is carefully noted as after 'twelve' (2.1.3), midnight, the witching hour. Banquo delivers a diamond from the King to Macbeth for his wife to thank her for being a 'most kind hostess' (2.1.16).

Now might Banquo and Macbeth have the discussion promised in 1.3. Banquo tells Macbeth that he 'dreamt last night of the three weird sisters' (2.1.20), and that they apparently spoke the truth to Macbeth. Macbeth, however, lies to Banquo: 'I think not of them' (2.1.21), the response completing Banquo's line that ends in the word 'truth' (2.1.21). Macbeth also tells Banquo that now is not the time for their proposed discussion and goes one step further, telling Banquo that when the time comes, he shall gain honour if he sides with Macbeth. Banquo agrees, on the condition that the affair will not compromise his conscience. Banquo and Fleance go off to bed, leaving Macbeth alone.

Macbeth imagines that he sees a dagger before him and questions whether it is a real thing or 'a dagger of the mind' (2.1.28). The remainder of his soliloquy contains many references to witchcraft, as had Lady Macbeth's in 1.5: 'gouts of blood' (46); 'wicked dreams' (50); 'witchcraft' (51); 'Hecate' (52); 'wolf' (53); 'ghost' (56); 'horror' (59). The scene serves a dual purpose. In the first place, it poses Macbeth without a child against Banquo and Fleance, reinforcing the prophecy for Banquo. Secondly, it shows the inner workings of Macbeth's mind. It is a rule for Shakespeare that any time a character is speaking in an aside or to the audience, the character is telling the truth. Macbeth is no longer plagued by any doubt whatsoever, and his instruction to the servant to have Lady Macbeth ring a bell reminds us of her complicity. When the bell does ring, Macbeth describes it as a death knell. On one level it is, but on another, it is the audio signal of the instigation of Lady Macbeth's plan and the herald of her entrance for scene 2.

Scene ii: In the middle of a restless, moonlit night (which we would recognise as the beginning of a horror movie), an owl shrieks and a King is killed. The act that we have waited happens off-stage, while Lady Macbeth describes how she drugged the wine of Duncan's guards and left the doors open, the daggers ready for her husband's use. Curiously, Lady Macbeth explains that she herself would have killed Duncan 'had he
not resembled/ My father as he slept' (2.2.12-13). Apparently, her moral code includes regicide but draws the line at patricide. The point that murder is murder and is wrong is lost on her.

What follows is even more curious. The two conspirators have an exchange about the sound of voices. Two of the court guests have awakened, but then prayed themselves back to sleep. Macbeth could not say 'Amen' and this weakness upsets him. His wife's advice is most patronising: 'Consider it not so deeply' (2.2.29). Macbeth, however, continues to ramble, accusing himself of murdering sleep. Lady Macbeth chides him to get a hold of himself and wash the blood from his hands. She then notices that he has the daggers with him. Angrily she tells him to go back and put the daggers by the guards and to smear the guards with Duncan's blood. When Macbeth refuses, she goes herself. In her absence, Macbeth tries to wash his hands but they will not come clean. When Lady Macbeth returns, she is covered in royal blood and believes 'a little water clears us of this deed' (2.2.66). As someone knocks at the gate, they go to bed, Macbeth obviously shocked at what he has done.

This long-anticipated scene is somewhat disappointing in that we do not see the murder, but we do see is even more terrifying: murder from the point of view of the murderers. The blood on Macbeth's hands is not nearly so shocking as his simple comment on the taking of a human life, 'I have done the deed' (2.2.24). There is no description of the stabbing — Macbeth is totally focused on himself. There is no indication of remorse, only worry about whether he will ever sleep again. This is unlikely, since, if he becomes king, he must be watchful that he is not assassinated. As for his wife, she shares his fear of discovery.

These are cold-blooded killers, assassins not for political change, but solely for personal gain. Such amorality and disregard for human life alienates the audience from any sympathy they may have had for these two, and quickly aligns the Macbeths with the evil that had bee depicted by the witches. The witches are ugly on the outside, the Macbeths within. Another difference is that the Macbeths have consciously, logically, and intentionally chosen to murder their anointed King. The witches may harass, but they will not murder people. As in a classic modern murder mystery, we know who the murderers are. What remains now is how they are found out and how they are punished.

Scene iii: Picking up on the knocking at the door from the previous scene, Shakespeare apparently decides to relieve the tension with the comic entrance of the Porter. The Porter is justifiably annoyed by the knocking on the door that has roused him before sunrise. Like most of us, he curses whoever it is that seeks entrance to the Castle. But why would Shakespeare pick this moment for a comedy routine?

Actually, if the language is analysed closely, we can see that we probably interpret this bit as comic because of the repetition of what we recognise as a 'knock-knock' joke: 'Knock, knock. Who's there?' (2.3.3, 7, 12-13). The Porter, however, paints the Castle as Hell and sees himself admitting grave sinners: a greedy farmer who committed suicide; an 'equivocator' (or Jesuit priest) who allegedly preached for God using treasonous words; a thieving English tailor. The Porter also mentions Satan (Beelzebub: made famous by Queen in 'Bohemian Rhapsody'), another devil, and hell as well as noting the heat and fires of hell. He ends by asking: 'I pray you, remember the porter' (2.3.21).

Far from being only comic, the Porter is the bridge between the actual murder and its consequences. All those involved will soon be in a kind of hell. The Porter also reminds us of the supernatural side of the story before us and how it is a story of kings and politics, not everyday people with their everyday concerns, like a farmer, a priest, or a tailor.

We learn that it is Macduff and Lennox who have been knocking so earnestly. These men, members of Duncan's entourage, have been silent in the play so far. Macduff especially now takes on a critical role in the action. he and the Porter share a few quips about lying, foreshadowing the discovery about to be made. Macbeth shows Macduff to Duncan's room, and Lennox comments that in the night, he had heard 'strange
screams of death’ (2.3.58). Macbeth answers ironically ’’’Twas a rough night’ (2.3.64). Macduff returns screaming at what he has found, Duncan's brutally bloody body, and Macbeth goes to the crime scene.

When he returns, he admits to killing the two innocent guards, excusing the act as irrational behaviour out of rage at the guards being drenched in royal blood. Lady Macbeth swoons and while she is tended to, Malcolm and Donalbain, Duncan's sons, realised they are suspects. The two men decide to meet again after getting dressed to decide what to do. Malcolm, the named heir of Duncan, decides to go to England, and Donalbain to Ireland, knowing that ‘our separated fortune/Shall keep us both safer’ (2.3.140-141). They acknowledge that as Duncan's heirs, they could be next for the assassin's blade.

As the Porter had predicted, the lies in this scene compound on each other and they all issue from the mouth of Macbeth. Where he had stood firm in the face of discovery, his wife has literally faded away in a faint. With the death of his father, Malcolm should be King. His choice to flee creates a power vacuum which Macbeth will gladly fill. Structurally, we are still in the early part of the play, but the suspense of the question, 'What will happen next?' is unrelenting. Duncan's death is just the beginning.

Scene iv: This scene begins with an Old Man commenting that in seventy years that he remembers well, he cannot remember a worse night than the one that has just past. Ross addresses the Old Man as father, and instantly, we can see the comparison between this father and son, and the father and sons we have just left. Ross tells the Old Man that he agrees with him, that the clock says it is daytime, but it is as dark as night. Duncan's horses are behaving wildly, and Ross and the Old Man note that the horses are so crazed that 'they eat each other' (2.3.28). As we know about the witches' ability to influence nature, it is logical that these comments point to the association of Macbeth's murder and the witches. Duncan's murder will affect every aspect of life.

When Macduff enters, he offers a quick summary of 2.2 and, most importantly, informs us that he is not going to Scone to Macbeth's coronation. The Old Man closes the scene with a blessing:

    God's benison go with you, and with those
    That would make good of bad, and friends of foes.
    (2.4.40-41)

The blessing is a counterpoint to the evils related at the beginning of the scene. It will not, however, be sufficient to neutralise the damage that Macbeth has done.

Furthermore, Macduff's choice not to go to the coronation will arouse Macbeth's rage and suspicion toward him even more. The scene clearly puts Macduff in direct, though not yet open, opposition to Macbeth the murderer.

Analysis: Act III Commentary

Scene i: Structurally, Act III is the mid-point or centre of the five act play. Here we find Banquo thinking that the prophecies of the witches concerning Macbeth have all come true. He wonders if their prophecy concerning him may also be true. Banquo, however, suspects that to make the prophecies come to pass, Macbeth has 'play'dst most fouly for't' (3.1.3).

Macbeth invites Banquo to a feast and asks if he can meet with him. Banquo informs the King that he plans to send the afternoon riding with his son, Fleance. Macbeth tells the unsuspecting Banquo 'Fail not our feast' (3.1.27). He also mentions that he learned that Malcolm and Donalbain are in England and Ireland. It is
obvious that Macbeth is intent on keeping Banquo and Fleance close to him and under observation, as well as knowing the whereabouts of any others that can challenge his claim to the throne.

When Macbeth dismisses the court until 7 PM, his murderous bent becomes all too apparent. He sends his servant to bring in two men who are waiting to see him. While he waits Macbeth reveals that to be King is nothing unless he can be sure that Banquo will not be 'father to a line of kings' (3.1.60). To secure his crown and defeat the witches' prophecy, Macbeth must kill Banquo and Fleance.

When the two men enter, we learn that this is Macbeth's second meeting with them. He has planted the seeds of doubt in their minds concerning Banquo, and asks them now to wreak their revenge on him. Macbeth uses the same psychology as Lady Macbeth had used on him, accusing them of not being men. Resolved, the murderers pledge their lives to Macbeth and agree to kill both Banquo and Fleance.

Significantly, the men are anonymous, as are the witches, a playwriting device that identifies them more as forces and catalysts for the action of the play rather than developed characters. This scene makes us aware of time on two opposing levels. On one level, it seems to take lace soon after Macbeth's coronation. However, some time must have elapsed for Macbeth to have established his court and to have had a previous meeting with the murderers. We also know that Macbeth plans for Banquo and Fleance to be murdered before 7 PM that night. The emphasis on time underscores the urgency that political stability has for Macbeth, a stability that is not predicated on the needs of the ruled but on the personal needs of the ruler. The specificity of time also heightens the suspense for the audience. While we are privy to the details of Macbeth's plan, we are helpless to interfere with or prevent the bloodshed. In turn, this realisation of our impotence underscores the horror of the evil before our eyes. In comparison to Macbeth, the witches seem almost benign.

Scene ii: Continuing the emphasis on time, this scene finds Lady Macbeth asking to see her husband, a radical change from the scene in which she was her husband's partner in murder. As she was before, Lady Macbeth is concerned about her husband's keeping to himself and the thoughts he may be harbouring.

Although he shares with her that 'terrible dreams/ … shakes us nightly (3.2.18-19) and calls her 'love' (29), 'dear wife' (36), and 'dearest chuck' (44), we notice that he refers to himself in the 'royal we', as he might speak to someone with whom he did not have a close, intimate relationship. He also withholds from her his murderous plot against Banquo and Fleance. He only urges her to focus her attention on the father and son at the forthcoming feast. Perhaps sensing his intent, Lady Macbeth implores him to leave such deep, dark thoughts and reminds him that Banquo and Fleance cannot live forever. With the murder plot in place, Macbeth finds 'comfort' (39) in his wife's comment: 'they are assailable' (39). He tells her that 'there shall be done/ A deed of dreadful note (43-44) before the night is over, leaving to guess what that deed will be.

Macbeth refuses to tell her more, but indicates that she will 'applaud' (46) his device. She is amazed by what he says, possibly because his language emphasises black, night, evil, and death. For Lady Macbeth the death of Duncan has had immediate and palpable rewards with which she is satisfied. She is apparently content to let events unfold in light of the regicide. Macbeth, on the other hand, is intent on securing the future by controlling the resent. This control means eliminating all real and all possible challenges to his authority. Thus, the scene marks the beginning of a rift in the Macbeth marriage.

Scene iii: Within the structure of Macbeth, this scene and 3.4 are the heart of the play. One of the shortest scenes (23 lines), it has far-reaching effects. We enter the company of the two murderers while they have been discussing the arrival of a third man. This man will make this band of killers equal the number of witches and establishes a real parallel to the unreal or ghostly witches. Since the third man knows the details of Macbeth's orders, the other two decide to let him join them while they wait in ambush for Banquo and Fleance. The three men attack and murder Banquo, but Fleance escapes. Crucially, although they could probably easily overtake and murder the boy, the murderers, while acknowledging that they 'have lost the best half of our affair' (21),
decide not to pursue him and return to Macbeth instead.

This tiny detail is of paramount importance not only to Macbeth, but also to us. We know that, even though he is dead, Banquo can still be the father of kings through Fleance. It now becomes clear to us that this event fulfils part of the witches' prophecy for Banquo, and that the rest of the prophecy, 'Lesser than Macbeth, and greater/ Not so happy, yet much happier' (1.3.65-66) remains open. If Banquo is dead, how can he be 'greater' and 'much happier' than Macbeth?

Scene iv: This banquet scene is perhaps the most famous of Shakespeare's banquet scenes and very different from others such as the conclusion of The Taming of the Shrew, or the magical feast in The Tempest. From this point forward, the events of the play will spiral rapidly toward the play's conclusion.

As the Macbeths welcomes the lords to dinner, two things happen: Macbeth underlines his wife's secondary role, and the murderers return. The arrival of the courtiers and the murderers almost simultaneously shows clearly the duality of Macbeth as King/murderer. The news of Banquo's throat being cut and his being stabbed twenty times and left in a ditch earns praise for the murderer from a pleased Macbeth. Fleance's escape, however, plunges Macbeth back into insecurity. Macbeth consoles himself that it will be some time before Fleance will return to seek revenge.

When Lady Macbeth reproaches her husband for not giving his guests suitable welcome, Banquo's Ghost, apparently in response to Macbeth's request to 'fail not our feast' (3.1.27), sits in Macbeth's place. Lennox asks Macbeth to sit, and Macbeth, knowing full well the whereabouts of Banquo, comments that the murdered man is missing. Ross, echoing Lennox, asks Macbeth again to sit, noting that Banquo has broken his promise to be present. Macbeth responds that 'the table's full' (47). Lennox contradicts the King, saying his place is reserved. At this point, Macbeth realises that the Ghost of Banquo sits in his place and reacts in horror. As Ross urges the nobles to leave, Lady Macbeth urges them to stay, that they should ignore this fit of Macbeth's, that it will pass. Lady Macbeth upbraids her husband for his comments, referring to the invisible dagger he had seen before Duncan's murder (2.1.33). She tells him to control himself, that 'you look but on a stool' (69). Exasperated, she once more accuses him of unmanly behaviour. Suddenly, Lady Macbeth reminds him that the room is full of people and with the Ghost now gone, Macbeth attempts to return to his guests. He sits in the now empty place and asks for a full glass of wine, with which he toasts Banquo. The Ghost appears again, and Macbeth screams at it to be gone since he knows 'thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold' (95). The Ghost leaves, and once again, Macbeth tries to pick up the feast where he left off. His wife, however, says he has 'displaced the mirth, broke the good meeting' (110). Macbeth turns on her and the guests, inquiring how they can be calm in the face of such a horrific apparition. Lady Macbeth, perhaps fearing that her husband will say more than he should, dismisses the guests.

Curiously, Macbeth asks his wife the time. When she responds that it is almost morning, Macbeth questions why Macduff was not at the banquet. He tells her that his spies will inform him and that he intends to see the Weird Sisters again. He also tells Lady Macbeth that he is 'in blood/ Steeped in so far that' (137-138) it is too late to turn back. Lady Macbeth leads him to bed.

As noted previously, it is here that the downward spiral picks up pace. Macbeth, having reaped the benefits of his regicide, is beginning to see the down side of his actions. He is seen publicly as a madman, a fact reinforced by his wife's comments that the fit witnessed has been an illness of long standing. Macbeth also makes referral to 'tomorrow' (32, 133), indicating to the audience that there is more reckoning to come.

It may seem strange that, in this scene, Lady Macbeth leads her husband to bed to sleep after his admission of nightmares. As we will see later, this is the last time that the Queen has any control over her husband in the domestic arena. It is she who tries to keep the gathering together and seems to be the more rational of the two. But she has already lost access to his political decisions, and this was, effectively, a political meeting. Even
this last bit of influence will be undermined in the Queen's next appearance.

As a co-conspirator, she cannot and will not escape retribution. Though she had tried to displace the guilt of the regicide to the grooms, that guilt will return to haunt her as Banquo's Ghost now haunts Macbeth. It now becomes apparent that the couple, once so close, is at opposite ends: Lady Macbeth in the past, Macbeth in the future.

The only connection between the two will be the blood spilled in the many murders. Lady Macbeth remains as she was when she plotted Duncan's murder - that one murder solved all her problems. Macbeth, however, has changed from the man who carefully considered Duncan's virtues before killing him to a man who must kill without pity to preserve himself.

**Scene v:** Literally out of nowhere, Shakespeare returns us to the world of the Three Witches; only here, they are meeting with their boss, Hecate. The Elizabethans would have easily recognised Hecate as the Head Witch. Indeed, she scolds the three witches for not consulting her about the Macbeth situation, telling them:

... all you have done
Hath been but for a wayward son,
Spiteful and wrathful; who, as others do,
Loves for his own ends, not for you. (10-13)

While it may seem a frivolous and gratuitous insertion, the scene reminds the audience of the limited power of the Weird Sisters. In addition, it emphasises Macbeth's own ability to choose evil without any intervention from witchcraft.

Notwithstanding, Hecate informs her wayward employees that she herself will raise 'artificial sprites' (26) that will make Macbeth's overconfidence his 'chiefest enemy' (33) and lead to his ruin.

In this way, Shakespeare acknowledges that, though Hecate will reinforce the Three Witches, Macbeth can still choose not to do evil. The witches, knowing human nature, are more than equal to the challenge of his continued downfall. It is difficult for us to understand what motivates the witches against Macbeth. If we consider, however, that they represent evil, it is clear that in a world where evil is the diametric opposite of good, they would want damnation for Macbeth not as a punishment, but as a reward.

The placement of this scene after Macbeth's intent to consult the Weird Sisters again 'to know/ By the worst means the worst' (3.4.135-136) signifies the strengthening of the witches' scheme in proportion to Macbeth's strengthening of purpose. They share with audience a hint at the play's outcome:

He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear
This hope 'bove wisdom, grace, and fear. (30-31)

For the Protestant Elizabethans who believed that a man's fate was determined before his birth, there is no hope for him. For Roman Catholics and others who believed that trusting in God's forgiveness could redeem even the worst sinner, Macbeth appears to throwing his redemption away. The question now is 'How will all this happen?'

**Scene vi:** Act III ends with yet more threat to Macbeth. In a conversation between Lennox and another Lord, the conditions outside the court are revealed: there is no meat to eat, many restless nights, no freedom or respect for the thanes, Macbeth is preparing for war with England. Macbeth, for the time, is labelled 'tyrant' (22, 25).
Lennox, however, cannot overlook that Malcolm and Donalbain fled following Duncan's assassination, just as Fleance had fled after Banquo's. Surely these flights from justice are an indication of guilty involvement. Lennox asks the Lord to confirm that Macduff is living in disgrace because he defied the King's order to attend the feast.

In his response, the Lord reveals that Malcolm, deprived of his birthright of succession to Duncan who had named him successor before his death, has found refuge at the English court of Edward the Confessor who acknowledges Malcolm as the rightful heir to the throne of Scotland. It is to Edward's court that Macduff has gone to seek military assistance to restore peace to Scotland.

Lennox advises the Lord to get a message to Macduff that Macbeth is furious with him and that Scotland looks to Macduff for deliverance from Macbeth's 'hand accursed' (49).

The scene serves as a link to the earlier events of Act II and fills in the background on what has happened outside Macbeth's court. Until now, though we know Macbeth to be a murdering fiend, we have been unaware of his effect on the country he rules. The relentless concentration on Macbeth and his emotional state seems to focus our attention solely on the domestic tragedy. Just as in Hamlet when 'something's rotten in the state of Denmark', the actions of the king have far reaching effect. Shakespeare reminds us that the domestic tragedies of life, especially of a king, can ripple through society.

In Scotland, the conditions have escalated to a point of civil unrest bordering on revolution. This extreme discontent is especially clear in Lennox whom we have just seen at the banquet table. In contrast to his concern over Macbeth's place at the table, here Lennox reveals his concern for his 'suffering country' (48). In a sense Lennox becomes a symbol of those who wonder about a leader's suitability to lead but will not act on his suspicions alone, a situation not unknown in present day politics.

The exchange between Lennox and the Lord further casts Macduff in the role of adversary to Macbeth. But should Macbeth fear him?

**Analysis: Act IV Commentary**

**Scene i:** According to Hecate's wishes, the Three Witches have gathered the ingredients for the spell. Here we see them blend them together to the famous chant:

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Double, double, toil and trouble,
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble. (10-11)
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Hecate approves of their efforts and promises them a 'share i'th'gains' (40). Macbeth has questions and asks for answers, not from the Weird Sisters, but from what he thinks are their more powerful masters. The answers take the form of three apparitions: an 'Armed Head', 'a Bloody Child', and 'a Child Crowned, with a tree in his hand' (Act IV, stage directions).

The Armed Head tells Macbeth to 'Beware Macduff' (71). The Bloody Child offers some hope: 'none of woman born/ Shall harm Macbeth' (80-81). The third apparition is even more enlightening:

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Macbeth shall never vanquished be until
Great Birnam Wood to high Dusinane Hill
Shall come against him. (92-94)
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Given the prognostications of these visions, Macbeth resolves to neutralise the threat of Macduff by murdering him. He knows, too, that all people are born 'of woman' and that woods do not walk. As Hecate had
foretold, he has indeed put 'His hopes bove wisdom, grace, and fear' (3.5.31). He therefore feels safe. Yet, despite the witches' warning to 'Seek to know no more' (103), Macbeth pushes his luck with his ultimate concern: "Shall Banquo's issue ever/ Reign in this kingdom?" (103-104). The answer is another vision of 'eight Kings and Banquo' (sds), with the last King holding a mirror in his hand. Macbeth is horrified. There are eight apparitions and 'many more' (120) in the mirror. The ghostly appearance of Banquo 'smiles upon' (123) Macbeth and 'points at them (the kings) for his' (124).

The scene may seem straight forward, but its simplicity betrays its complexity. Up to this point, Macbeth has acted out the end of the original prophecies given to him on the heath as he thought they had promised, and with the help of his wife. Here, without Lady Macbeth's assistance, he actively pursues answers, not prophecies, that will confirm the actions he has already taken and will take.

In addition, unlike his reaction to the first prophecies, Macbeth takes what appears before him as a true picture of the immediate and distant future, and accepts the witches' confirmation without question. He also does not allow for any other interpretation of the apparitions other than his own. Lennox enters to announce that Macduff has fled to England. To ensure the efficacy of the visions, Macbeth becomes 'bloody, bold, and resolute' (79), planning to attack Macduff's castle at Fife and kill all found there. The man who had been urged to 'screw your courage to the sticking place' (1.7.60) now proclaims 'This deed I'll do before this purpose cool' (134).

Not only are we reminded of the evil in Macbeth, but we are also shown that is almost beyond redemption. Aligning himself with the witches by choice, Macbeth can only go deeper and faster into his descent to Hell. Nonetheless, we feel sorry for him, knowing that, in the comfort of our seats in the theatre, we would never be so foolhardy.

Noticeable by her absence is Lady Macbeth, but we hardly notice since Macbeth himself had marginalised her in the events of Act III. Realising the scope of Macbeth's determination to eliminate all threats to his crown, we are more concerned with Macduff's '…wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls/ That trace him in his line' (152-153).

Scene ii: This scene opens with a conversation between Ross and Lady Macduff, who are debating why Macduff has fled to England. Ross tries to comfort his 'pretty cousin' (25), assuring her that her husband has acted for the best. Ross takes his leave of her and her young son. What follows is a touching and tender scene between mother and son that seems almost an oasis in the mayhem of the play.

The two discuss Macduff's absence in a tone that is rather playful, using the child's understanding of how birds live, not only to illustrate the points, but also to underscore the child's immaturity and limited grasp of the political furere. But is it limited?

The conversation switches tone when the child asks his mother 'Was my father a traitor, mother?' (44). Lady Macduff tells him that he was and that a traitor is 'one that swears and lies' (47) 'and must be hanged' (49). The child tells her that 'there are liars and swearers enow to beat the honest men and hang up them' (50-51). The audience is aware that they are not only discussing Macduff, but also Macbeth.

A messenger enters to warn Lady Macduff to leave with her children immediately. Lady Macduff, however, does not leave, either because she believes in her innocence or she does not have time, since the murderers enter almost right away. The boy is stabbed and dies in front of his helpless mother who tries to flee. We know she cannot escape the bloodbath.

The scene is one of, if not the bloodiest, in the play, made all the most terrifying because it unflinchingly depicts the murder of an innocent child. Now we are certain beyond any doubt that Macbeth has crossed the line of all sense and morality.
Contrasts abound in this scene. Lady Macduff, the loving, caring mother, is a stark contrast to Lady Macbeth who would have 'dashed the brains' (1.7.58) of her own child. The bigger difference of the Macduffs as a happy family unit from the disjointed Macbeths is glaring. Furthermore, Macduff the good is counterpointed to Macbeth the villain and traitor, even though both are absent from the scene.

Within the play, the scene is placed between Macbeth's resolution to murder Macduff and the reappearance of Macduff, clearly establishing a personal motivation to Macduff's political agenda. There can be no question now that the murderous Macbeth must go, not only for the political survival of Scotland, but also for the peace and safety of her people.

**Scene iii**: The geography of the play changes from Scotland to England. Malcolm and Macduff are contemplating their course of action against Macbeth. Malcolm wants to mourn his exile, while Macduff wants to fight to free the country, prophetically noting that

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Each new morn
New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows
Strike heaven on the face. (4-6)
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Interestingly, Malcolm, who has not been in Scotland since his father's demise, lists Macbeth's faults:

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bloody,
Luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful,
Sudden, malicious, smacking of every sin
That has a name. (57-60)
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Reluctantly, we must agree. Surprisingly, however, Malcolm turns the focus to his faults, saying he has a lustful nature. Macduff defends this admission by saying that Malcolm may indulge his lust with willing women and keep the knowledge from the people, in essence, a victimless crime. Malcolm further confesses to avarice, and Macduff reassures him again that, as King, Malcolm will have more than enough to satisfy him. For a third time, Malcolm says that he has none of

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the king-becoming graces,
As justice, verity, temperance, stableness,
Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,
Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude. (91-94)
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Macduff can stand no more. He bewails the fact that the rightful king, son of a sainted father and mother, should 'blaspheme his breed' (109). Malcolm, touched by Macduff's 'good truth and honor' (117), retracts his confessions as he is really still a virgin, has never broken a promise, and 'delight[s]/ No less in truth than life' (128-129). He tells Macduff that he will indeed fight for his people and his country. Shocked by the denial coming on the heels of the admissions, Macduff cannot answer Malcolm. But this is only one shock.

After the Doctor enters to comment on Edward the Confessor's healing power, Ross enters to tell Macduff of the events at his castle in Fife. With the deaths of his entire family, Macduff is doubly motivated to overthrow Macbeth. Malcolm decides that the time is right to accept Edward's offer of help.

This scene raises many questions: Why does Malcolm admit to sins he has not committed? Why does a Doctor enter and offer comments on Edward the Confessor? Why has Malcolm waited to depose Macbeth? We have already seen the evil perpetrated by a man who unlawfully usurped the throne. By admitting to sins of the flesh and spirit, Malcolm still seems a viable choice for King. In our political world, lust and avarice are forgivable sins in the sense that they do not threaten individual liberty. When Malcolm admits to some of the
same sins of which Macbeth is guilty, however, he seems to be testing Macduff's loyalty to him. If Macduff would overthrow Macbeth, it is likely that he would overthrow a king with similar tendencies. We recall that at the beginning of the play, Macbeth had had the same concern. With the last admission and Macduff's reaction, to abandon Scotland since all hope for peace is dead, Macduff proves his loyalty to Malcolm who can then recant and assume his rightful place.

The introduction of the Doctor at this point is a commentary on the goodness and saintliness of both the English king and the Scottish heir, as well as commentary on the state of the people under such a king. If they are sick, the King miraculously cures them, clearly illustrating that such a King rules with God's favour. As he can cure physical ills, the King can also cure political, social, and economic ills. If Malcolm is crowned, the same outcome is promised for Scotland.

The extension of the metaphor from England to Scotland also reflects the accession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne of Elizabeth I in 1603. As Elizabeth had guided England through its most prosperous and influential period, James, now James I of England, brings unity and continued peace.

With Malcolm's assurance that Macduff is firmly in his camp, the future King knows that now is the time to his launch his attack. If he had acted sooner, Malcolm may have been perceived to be responsible for his father's death. The time spent in England has given him the opportunity to prove his innocence to Edward and to work on establishing vital alliances. With these questions answered, only one remains: what about the apparitions?

**Analysis: Act V Commentary**

**Scene i:** Having set us up for the invasion of Scotland by its rightful king, Shakespeare returns us to the domestic tragedy and another famous scene. When we last saw Lady Macbeth, she was leading her husband to bed to sleep. This scene opens, ironically, with another Doctor and a Gentlewoman discussing a female sleep-walker. When the Doctor asks the Gentlewoman to repeat what she heard the sleep-walker say, she steadfastly refuses, since there were no witnesses.

Here enters Lady Macbeth with a lit taper which she has ordered to be constantly by her side. In her sleep, Lady Macbeth relates details of Duncan's murder and her husband's part in it, the murder of Banquo, and the holocaust at Fife. The Doctor tells the Gentlewoman that the Queen is beyond his help and, like the Gentlewoman, the Doctor will 'dare not speak' (83).

What we witness is the descent of Lady Macbeth into a distinctly female Hell. Without her husband's support, there is no one to whom she can unburden her guilt. This guilt is so intense that it manifests itself in her sleep-walking. Although we cannot determine whether or not she is mad, the Doctor hints at her probable end by warning the Gentlewoman to

Remove from her the means of annoyance
And still keep eyes upon her. (80-81)

If we are expected to feel sympathy for Lady Macbeth, the expectation is defeated by her recounting the murders to which we have been witness. We can only pity her so far before concluding that she has indeed earned her punishment.

**Scene ii:** The scene now returns to the revolution about to be launched. We are updated on the military preparations which have gone according to plan. We learn that Donalbain, Malcolm's brother and not mentioned since the assassination of Duncan, is not with his brother. We assume that he remains in Ireland. It
does not matter where Donalbain is. The army is on its way to Birnam Wood. The name strikes a chord in the audience, since now we realise that Macbeth's visions are about to come to fruition.

**Scene iii:** Macbeth, who has been absent from the play since his last meeting with the witches, appears now, contemplating his lack of fear in the face of the marching army. He is confident he is safe 'Till Birnam Wood remove to Dunsinane' (2). He also recalls that the thanes leading the army were all born of woman.

The Doctor reports that Lady Macbeth is sick of mind and that he cannot help her. Macbeth orders him to cure her and sets off in his armour to wage battle.

This scene points to Macbeth's ultimate fall and the hopelessness of his and his wife's situation. Though he maintains his brave stance toward the imminent battle, clearly Macbeth has lost a more important battle, self-deception. He has lost all perspective on his ability to postpone retribution for his evil deeds.

**Scene iv:** Short but essential, this scene solves the mystery of how a forest can move. In order to conceal the numbers of his men, Malcolm orders every soldier to cut down a tree bough and carry it in front of him. With his allies, Siward and Macduff, Malcolm moves toward Dunsinane.

Macbeth's defeat is only a matter of time. Had he not been so ego-centric, Macbeth would have worked out the witches' riddle. What else has he neglected?

**Scene v:** Thinking himself safe behind strong castle walls, Macbeth receives the news of his wife's death. He takes a moment to comment on her passing without questioning how she died. His emphasis on 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow' reveals he is still thinking about the future, but not as confidently as before. He is interrupted by a messenger, and his news is not good: Birnam Wood seems to be moving.

Macbeth now knows that the witches spoke the truth, but not the truth he had heard. Yet, he is determined to die fighting. There is, however, hope that he has interpreted the remaining visions correctly.

**Scene vi:** This ten-line scene elaborates the battle plan for Malcolm's troops. Macduff and Siward are sent forward to charge the castle. But what about Macbeth? (Jump to the text of Act V, Scene vi)

**Scene vii:** Young Siward meets Macbeth and they duel. Young Siward is slain and Macbeth's confidence is bolstered when he realises, as we do, that the youth, Siward's son, was born of woman.

Macduff is on the hunt for Macbeth, while Siward leads Malcolm into the castle, signalling the end of the battle. Will the visions be fulfilled? Or will Macbeth be finally dethroned?

**Scene viii:** Here Macbeth finally confronts Macduff and admits that he has been avoiding the Thane of Fife. Foolishly, he urges him to get back since Macbeth has already shed enough of his blood, as if Macduff really needed to be reminded of his enormous loss. Almost ridiculously, Macbeth tells the man that he leads a 'charm-ed life which must not yield/To one of woman born' (12-13). Macduff tells him that he 'was from his mother's womb/Untimely ripped' (15-16). Suddenly, Macbeth realises that he has failed to recognise the witches' double meaning and blames them for his failure. He then refuses to fight, Macduff asks him to surrender and face execution. Macbeth refuses and they fight, Macbeth falling on Macduff's sword.

Siward is informed of his son's death, but refuses to mourn him since he died a hero's death. Macduff enters with Macbeth's head and all proclaim Malcolm King of Scotland. Malcolm makes the thanes earls, the first in Scotland, and promises to recall exiled friends and mete out justice to Macbeth's supporters. The play ends with an invitation to attend Malcolm's coronation at Scone.
Or does it end? What about Macbeth's final vision and Banquo's prophecy? Elizabethans would have known the story of Macbeth's treachery and demise from Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland (1587) by Raphael Holinshed, Shakespeare's source for the play. They would have also known, as we do not, that James VI of Scotland, now James I of England, could trace his ancestry back to Banquo. According to a family tree printed in 1578 by John Leslie entitled De Originae Regiae … Scotorum, James VI was the sixth king of that name to rule Scotland and was descended from Banquo, Thane of Lochaber, who lived in the eleventh century under King Macbeth. Holinshed confirms Leslie's genealogy by interrupting his story with a similar genealogy of 'the orginall line of those kings, which have descended from …Banquho', in all about sixteen kings, ending with James VI. It would seem then that Banquo, not Malcolm, has the last word.

**Analysis: Historical Background**

Shakespeare drew from many sources when he wrote—*the Holingshed Chronicles of England* was one of these. From this source he drew much of his historical knowledge, as Holingshed was the definitive historical source of that time. The story of Macbeth comes from this source. However, Shakespeare changed several characters to meet the theatrical purpose of the play. In Holingshed’s account Macbeth is older than Duncan, but Shakespeare reverses their ages and Duncan is portrayed as the older of the two.

Macbeth was written especially for James I and was performed in 1606. James I was King of Scotland when he came to the English throne; his descendants can be traced back to Banquo. In Shakespeare’s Macbeth, often referred to in theater circles as “The Scottish Play,” Banquo is portrayed as an honorable man who promotes goodness and fairness. In this way, Shakespeare was keenly aware of his audience and his political responsibilities. His plays reflect not only timeless conflicts and resolutions, but a view of the Elizabethan society.

The society in which Shakespeare lived was reflected in the characters he wrote about. London was a crowded city teeming with aristocrats, working class people, and indigents—it was a hub of activity. By today’s standards the sanitation was very poor, and there were frequent epidemics of the plague. The city was infested with rats, and the fleas on the rats caused the Bubonic plague. There were no sewers, only open drains in the middle of the street. The conditions were difficult; however, the spirit of the people prevailed. It was in this society that Shakespeare wrote and created his characters.

**Shakespearean Theatre**

The support of theatre in England varied depending on who was the reigning monarch. Queen Elizabeth I (1533 - 1603) was the monarch when Shakespeare came into the public eye. Elizabeth supported the theater and the company performed at the castle on a regular basis. She reigned until her death in 1603 when James I became ruler.

James I was also an avid supporter of the theatre. Shakespeare’s company, “Lord Chamberlain’s Men,” came under royal patronage and were subsequently known as “the King’s Men.” However, the local London government felt that actors and theater were improper. Therefore, no theaters were allowed to be built within the city limits. These restrictions did not keep the London people from the theaters, however, and by 1600 there were more theaters than ever built on the outskirts of London.

The Globe theater was built by Cuthbert Burbage in 1599 for the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. When Burbage could not obtain a lease for the original theater, it was moved to a new site in Southwark, on the south side of the Thames River. The construction of the Globe was a joint venture between the Burbage brothers and the actors of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men.
The Globe was a three-story structure with at least five sides and no roof over the stage. The roof extended around the gallery that encircled the theatre. Each floor had seats that encircled a stage that was built in the center. Behind the stage were dressing rooms and space to store scenery and props. There were no curtains used to conceal the stage, only a curtain to separate the backstage area from the stage. Very few props were used. In the front center portion of the stage was a trap door used to enable a person to vanish (or to allow a ghost to appear.)

A flag was flown from the front portion of the roof to announce when a play was to be presented. When patrons saw the flag, they knew there would be a performance that day; there were no performances at night, as there was no artificial lighting at the Globe. The theater was small—approximately 30 feet in height, 86 feet in diameter, 56 feet for the open courtyard, and about 40 feet for the stage itself. The patrons either stood in the courtyard and watched the play, or paid more and sat in the gallery.

The actors were flexible and dedicated to the craft of acting. They actors had a major responsibility to convey the purpose of the drama to the audience. The actors supported the written word through their portrayal of the characters. The dialogue and the language supported the setting of the scene within the play, as scenery was very limited. Shakespeare’s language provided the scenery for the play. When the scene was changed to an evening scene, the actor would carry a torch in to indicate that it was night. The audience of the time was accustomed to this type of staging.

The theater was a much more intimate setting than the theaters of today. The patrons would voice their opinions during a production of a play; some even threw vegetables at the actors on the stage. The theater gained a reputation for rowdy behavior and aristocratic society did not consider theater a respectable part of Elizabethan society.

The Globe burned down in a fire in 1613, when a cannon was fired during a performance and the thatched roof over the gallery caught on fire. It was rebuilt that year, but in 1644 the structure was torn down when theatres were closed due to the government ban on theatres.

**Analysis: Places Discussed**

*Scotland*

*Scotland*. British country north of England that historically had its own language, monarchy, parliament, and culture. In the period in which *Macbeth* is set, 1040 to 1057, Scotland was beginning to form as a nation, building on its Viking and Saxon tribal nucleus, while constantly wracked by bloody internal disputes and wars with England. Shakespeare’s choice of this period in Scottish history is far from accidental, as it pertains to the origin of the two Scottish royal lineages—those of Malcolm and Banquo—through which James I constructed his successful claims to the thrones of both England and Scotland. Shakespeare even stages the constitutional shift from feudal elective monarchy to patrilineal inheritance and the construction of “divine right” (to which James constantly referred), when Duncan names Malcolm as heir and prince of Cumberland.

By the seventeenth century, Scotland was usually described in the English cultural imagination as wild and ungovernable because of its difficult topography, harsh weather, and uncivilized people. Images of Scotland, like those of Ireland and Wales, suffered from English Tudor nation-building—that is, “England” was constructed negatively, by defining what it was not. Hence, Shakespeare’s Scotland becomes England’s antithetical Other, a nightmarish land of barren heaths and misty crags, populated not only by aggressive clansmen and regicides but also by supernatural forces and demoniac spirits. The play’s “England,” on the other hand, is depicted as graciously ruled by a “good king,” the saintly Edward the Confessor, who heals with a royal touch and possesses a “heavenly gift of prophecy.”
This imaginary rugged Scottish landscape, with its crags, hollows, and storms, is symbolically central to Shakespeare’s depiction of a turbulent political structure. Consequently, in the play’s denouement, as the nation is returned to “natural” order, the wild countryside itself seems to rise up against the murderous Macbeth, as Birnam Wood comes toward Dunsinane, in the shape of Malcolm’s camouflaged troops and in accordance with the weird (or wyrd) sisters’ prophecy. Simultaneously, the disruptions of the natural world, the “hours dreadful and things strange” with cannibalistic horses and “strange screams of death,” which accompany Macbeth’s regicide and rule, are apparently purged as health is restored to the “sickly weal.” However, the replacement of one regicide by another reveals the similarities between the regimes, staging the play’s equivocal wordplay and eliding the differences, as each term becomes “what is not,” both “fair” and “foul,” like the landscape itself.

**Heath**

Heath. Fictional Scottish wasteland of uncontrollable natural and supernatural forces. As inhabited by the three weird sisters, the “blasted heath” is a symbolically liminal site of transformation and equivocal multivocality, in which weather is both “foul and fair,” where the sisters are both “women” and bearded males, who can appear and disappear, and where prophecy is both “ill” and “good” as language subverts sight and meaning. In addition, the sisters’ presence gives Scotland gender as (super-)naturally “female” in its uncontrollable wildness throughout the play, in contrast to Scotland’s strongly masculine warrior culture.

*Scone*

*Scone.* Ancient castle and holy site, immediately north of Perth and thirty miles north of Edinburgh. The Pictish capital of the early Scots, Scone became the traditional site for the “investment” or crowning of new monarchs, who sat on the Stone of Scone, a legendary symbol of nationalism that traces back to the eighth century. The stone was seized by England’s Edward I in 1296 and removed to London, where it remained for many centuries.

*Inverness*

*Inverness.* Scottish town on the Moray Firth, at Loch Ness, about thirty miles west of Forres and about ninety miles north of Fife. Inverness is the site of the Macbeths’ feudal castle, located on the northern edge of Duncan’s territory and strategically placed to guard against incursions from northern Europe. However, this distant frontier also makes it an ideal place for rebellion against a centralized government, as evidenced by Cawdor’s insurrection. The town of Cawdor is only ten miles east of Inverness.

*Dunsinane Hill*

*Dunsinane Hill.* Thousand-foot-high crag, part of the Sidlaw hills and less than ten miles north of Scone. The site of Macbeth’s military fortress and last stand, the daunting hill faces a forested area which stretches twelve miles northwest to the town of Birnam. It is through this “wood” that Malcolm and Siward make their final, disguised attack.

**Analysis: Modern Connections**

The witches, or weird sisters, of *Macbeth* have remained one of the most popular aspects of the play. The three witches, the first characters the audience encounters, are mysterious beings who set the tone for the rest of the play, most of which takes place in a similarly dark and stormy atmosphere. When the play was performed during the late English Renaissance, the witches would make their initial appearance coming up and out of the trap door on the stage of the Globe theater. Later productions included singing, dancing, and
flying witches, attached to ceiling wires.

The witches also perform a more serious function than that of entertainment: their appearance in the play poses the question of whether Macbeth's actions are governed by fate or determined by his own free will. Critics have questioned the meaning behind the witches statement "All hail, Macbeth! That shall be King hereafter!" (I.iii.50). Is this statement a warning to Macbeth or does it tempt him to consider possibilities he may have thought of before? Or, is it a prophesy of the future? Through the witches, some maintain, Shakespeare questions whether our own lives are governed by fate or free will.

Questions regarding gender roles in Macbeth may also strike modern students as particularly compelling, as these roles in contemporary society continue to shift and evolve. Some observers read Lady Macbeth's persuasion of her husband to follow through on the murder of Duncan as being guided by her fascination with male power. She appeals to her husband's sense of manhood, and in effect, some maintain, uses seduction and humiliation to convince him to commit the murder. It has also been argued that Lady Macbeth rejects her own feminine "sensibilities" and takes on a more masculine role for herself because of her perception that femininity is equated with weakness. She assumes this masculine role for herself in an effort to act on her own ambition and desire for power.

Masculinity in this play appears to be defined almost exclusively by violent action, and Macbeth seems driven to prove his manhood through violent deeds, first in battle, then by murder. Macbeth's brutal slaying of Macdonwald is detailed by a sergeant: "he unseam'd him from the nave [navel] to the chops [jaws], / And fix'd his head upon our battlements" (I.ii.22-3). When Macbeth begins to back away from the thought of murdering Duncan, telling his wife "We will proceed no further in this business" (I.vii.31), she questions his manhood, stating that when he initially broached the subject with her, then he was a man (I.vii.48-49). By the end of the scene, he has decided that he will kill the king. In addition to murdering Duncan, Macbeth murders the king's guards and then orders the murders of Banquo, Fleance, and Macduff's family. When Macduff learns of these last killings, Malcolm urges the grieving Macduff to take revenge, to act "like a man" (IV.iii.219).

It has been argued that Macbeth himself is distanced somewhat from the violence of the play in that he commits the murders of Duncan offstage, and he orders other people to commit the murder of Banquo, Fleance, and Macduff's family, rather than committing them himself. The notion that in the society in which Macbeth lived the stereotypical male was characterized by violence and that the violence was legitimized through warfare is agreed upon by many critics, however. Just as Macbeth uses violent means to further his own ambition, the play ends with Macbeth's violent removal from the throne and with Macduff appearing on stage with Macbeth's severed head.

Finally, the theme of ambition and how it relates to governance is a major issue in the play. Macbeth lets his ambition supersede his own judgment. In I.vii, he discusses the reasons why he should not kill Duncan. He states that his loyalty to the king has several layers: he is the king's subject, his kinsmen, and his host. After highlighting the king's virtues, Macbeth acknowledges that the only reason to kill Duncan is his own "vaulting ambition" (I.vii.27). At this point, his thoughts are interrupted by Lady Macbeth. He seems to have had a change of heart, but after his wife's speech, Macbeth is determined to murder the king. After he himself is crowned, he is driven to protect what he has gained by ordering the deaths of anyone whom he considers a threat. While violence is an integral part of this warrior society, Macbeth's use of it off the battlefield to further his personal ambition, while unchecked through most of the play, is in the end not tolerated by his subjects. The twentieth century provides numerous examples of world leaders who to varying degrees abused power until their actions were checked by the citizens of their own nation or by the rest of the world. This abuse of power could take the form of one man's effort to improve his own political position, as in the case of Richard M. Nixon; his actions resulted in his resignation from the presidency. A far more extreme example would be that of Adolph Hitler, who used the power he attained to practice genocide until he was stopped through international warfare.
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Act 1, scene 4 is a continuation of the battle scene of Act 1, scene 2. Sandwiched in between is Macbeth's first encounter with the witches and their prophecy that he will be Thane of Cawdor. In scene 2, King Duncan has ordered Cawdor's execution, and here in scene 4, Malcolm, Duncan's son reports on how the execution went. For the Jacobean people who frequently witnessed executions by beheading, the prisoner pledging loyalty at the last minute was frequently rewarded with pardon. Cawdor, however, does not survive, in spite of confessing 'his treasons', imploring the King's 'pardon', and showing 'a deep repentance'.

...the milk of human kindness.
(1.5.15)

As Lady Macbeth waits for her husband to arrive home after she has received his letter with the news of his promotion and the prophecies, she decides that her husband will be king only through her iron determination since he is sometime too full of compassion, a very unmanly trait. The phrase is therefore at the top of Lady Macbeth's insult list so that when we use the phrase to approve of someone's compassion, we are changing it from an insult to a compliment.

The be-all and the end-all
(1.7.5)

According to the OED, Shakespeare invented this phrase and all subsequent uses by other authors are borrowed from the playwright. In the play, Macbeth is debating with himself about committing the murder of Duncan and becoming king without getting caught. If killing the King would have no consequences, he would have no other problems. But Macbeth knows regicide can never be so simple. For us, it means an event or person that is the beginning and end of all things in one package; an ego maniac; a conceited person.

Knock, knock. Who's there…?
(2.3.5-6)

In one of the very few comedy bits in Macbeth, the Porter is roused to open the gate just after the murder of Duncan. As he goes to the gate half asleep, he engages in a conversation with himself and several others of his own creation. It seems that Shakespeare is responsible for the beginning of the 'Knock Knock' joke. Variety, an entertainment industry magazine, reported on 19 August 1936 that America was caught up in a 'knock-knock craze', and on 14 November 1936, England fell for the tasteless pun answers to the question 'knock-knock' when radio comedian Wee Georgie Wood told several of the jokes on a radio show. Nowadays, the 'knock-knock' joke is an integral part of panto (short for pantomime), a form of interactive theatre that stages children's fairy tales, especially at Christmas in Great Britain.

What's done is done.
(3.2.12)

Here a very calm Lady Macbeth chides her husband for still thinking about Duncan's murder. She tries to tell
him that there is nothing that can be done about it: dead is dead. Interestingly this advice to her husband emerges in a negative sentence in her sleep-walking: 'What's done cannot be undone' (5.1.68). Her guilty conscience is even more forceful than the seemingly simple advice she gives Macbeth. Not only can nothing be done about Duncan's murder, but nothing can be done to undo it.

**Double, double toil and trouble.**

(4.1.10)

Before Macbeth arrives to ask for more prophecy from the witches, they are seen mixing up a potion in a cauldron. This phrase is part of the chant that casts the spell of hard labour and tribulation. In these lines Shakespeare abandons iambic pentameter for tetrameter (four beats per line) which resembles basic song rhythm. With this language and their description as 'unnatural hags', Shakespeare single-handedly created our image of the Halloween witch.

**The crack of doom.**

(4.1.116)

To the Jacobean, a 'crack' of thunder announced 'doom' or Doomsday, also known as Judgement Day. In this scene Macbeth has urged the witches to show him more prophecy and when the Apparitions of eight young kings appear in a never-ending line, Macbeth thinks they will 'stretch out to th'crack of doom'; in other words, Banquo's children will be kings for a very long time. This passage would be considered a compliment to James VI of Scotland who, as a Stuart, had recently become King James I of England, taking over from Elizabeth I, the last of the Tudors.

**One fell swoop.**

(4.3.231)

While we would recognise 'fell' as the past tense of 'fall', Shakespeare's audience would interpret this invented phrase as an extension of Macduff's poultry metaphor when speaking of his wife and children. For the audience, 'fell' meant 'fierce, cruel, or savage' and the word 'swoop' would mean the attack pattern of a bird of prey like the kite in line 219. To Macduff, Macbeth's attack on his family and their murder is like the attack of a kite on defenceless chickens. For us, the phrase means all at once, which is not too similar from Macbeth's murder of Macduff's family.

**Out, damned spot.**

(5.1.33)

Possibly one of Shakespeare's most famous scenes, the sleep-walking Lady Macbeth speaks out in her dream what she and her husband have done to gain the throne. One of the themes of Macbeth is how difficult it is to wash a sin from the soul, using blood on the hands as a metaphor. The Macbeths learn to their peril that their sins will never be washed away by physical means. This phrase has been used frequently to sell everything from toothpaste to car polish.

**The patient must minister to himself.**

(5.3.45-46)

A doctor has been summoned to cure Lady Macbeth of sleep-walking, but he tells Macbeth that any cure for the Queen is not within his power. In essence, the doctor is telling Macbeth that guilt will not go away until the guilty party acknowledges the wrong and makes amends, and that Lady Macbeth's walking and talking in her sleep is Macbeth's problem.
Come what may,
Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.
(1.3)

Macbeth mutters this sentence to himself in the scene with the witches. He is confused and bewildered by the witches’ prediction that he will become king, but at the end of the scene he comes to believe that he indeed may become king.

All our service
In every point twice done, and then done double
(1.6)

Lady Macbeth's evil cunning is all the more chilling because of her language. Here she welcome's Duncan, whom she has plotted to kill. Her words take on double meaning; she makes hidden references to her plans even as she conceals them.

Away, and mock the time with fairest show:
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.
(1.7)

Macbeth, at Lady Macbeth's urging, finally resolves to murder Duncan. At the conclusion of the scene, he tells Lady Macbeth to leave him, and entertain the guests as if everything is normal.

Go get some water,
And wash this filthy witness from your hand
(2.1)

After the murder of Duncan, Lady Macbeth assists Macbeth in wiping away any traces of the crime. Her "management" of Macbeth and his guilt is one of the characteristics of her behavior throughout the play.

What hands are here? Ha, they pluck out mine eyes!
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand?
(2.1)

In the same scene, Macbeth expresses anguish, realizing that nothing will be able to wipe the guilt from his conscience. He proclaims, figuratively, that nothing can wash the blood from his hands, not even all of Neptune's ocean.

Here's the smell of the blood still:
all the perfumes of Arabia
will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!
(2.1)

As the play progresses, Lady Macbeth deteriorates under the psychological burden of her deeds. Just as Macbeth proclaimed earlier with a similar figure of speech, she realizes that nothing can clear her conscience. Finally, in act V, her guilt becomes too great, and she commits suicide.

Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.
(5.5)

Macbeth's famous words after being told of Lady Macbeth's death; he is filled with anguish, and a expresses a view found in many of Shakespeare's characters, that of life and its seeming futility.

**Quotes in Context: "A Deed Without A Name"**

Context: Macbeth and Banquo are told by three witches that Macbeth will be king and that the descendants of Banquo will be crowned. Driven by his own wicked ambition and that of his wife, Macbeth murders King Duncan and usurps the throne. Worried because the sons of Duncan remain safe in exile and Fleance, son of the recently murdered Banquo, has escaped his assassins, Macbeth visits the den of the weird sisters.

SECOND WITCH
By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.
Open locks, Whoever knocks. [Enter MACBETH.]
MACBETH
How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags? What is't you do?
ALL
A deed without a name.
MACBETH
I conjure you, by that which you profess, Howe'er you come to know it, answer me. Though you untie the winds, and let them fight Against the churches; though the yesty waves Confound and swallow navigation up; Though bladed corn be lodged, and trees blown down; Though castles topple on their warders' heads: . . . Even till destruction sicken–answer me To what I ask you.

**Quotes in Context: "A Little Water Clears Us Of This Deed"**

Context: Macbeth has just murdered Duncan, the King of Scotland. He is in a state of shock, and he has not carried out the plan he and Lady Macbeth had made to put the knife in the hands of the drugged and drunken grooms who guarded the king. Lady Macbeth, who could not kill Duncan herself because he reminded her of her father, goes to complete the plan. She is now the strong one, for her husband can no longer even think of what he has done, much less look at it again. She bolsters herself with brave talk and leaves to set the scene. Meanwhile Macbeth stares at his bloody hands in horror, believing that they can never be cleansed. Lady Macbeth, however, whose hands are now as bloody, berates him as a coward and assures him that merely washing their hands will clear them of murder. A knocking at the gates halts their hurried conversation and sends them to their rooms to pretend sleep.

MACBETH . . . Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No. This my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine, Making the green one red.
LADY MACBETH
My hands are of your colour; but I shame To wear a heart so white. [Knock.] I hear a knocking At the south entry. Retire we to our chamber. A little water clears us of this deed. . . .

**Quotes in Context: "A Tale Told By An Idiot, Full Of Sound And Fury Signifying Nothing"**

Context: Macbeth, King of Scotland, is a usurper who murders the lawful King Duncan and, when the latter's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, flee for their lives, fastens the blame on them. Macbeth's reign is fitful and bloody. As the years pass, he gains more enemies, and many nobles desert Scotland to join Malcolm in England. Lady Macbeth, her husband's partner in assassination, suffers from a guilt-ridden conscience that will not let her sleep. There is no remedy for her illness, and she dies just as Malcolm's forces, come from England to restore the throne to its rightful claimant, attack Macbeth's stronghold. Word is brought to
Macbeth of his wife's death. He bitterly philosophizes on the event, in a passage which, perhaps, contains more famous lines than any other in Shakespeare.

MACBETH. . . To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow, Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, To the last syllable of recorded time; And all our yesterdays have lighted fools The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more. It is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury Signifying nothing.

Quotes in Context: "After Life's Fitful Fever He Sleeps Well"

Context: Advised by three witches that he will be king, Macbeth gives way to his ambition, murders King Duncan, and usurps the throne. In his hasty grab for power, Macbeth has lost something more precious, peace, which, ironically, he has given to the slain king. The new king addresses Lady Macbeth.

MACBETH. . . . Better be with the dead, Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace, Than on the torture of the mind to lie In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave. After life's fitful fever he sleeps well, Treason has done his worst; nor steel, nor poison, Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing, Can touch him further. LADY MACBETH, Come on. Gentle my lord, sleek o'er your rugged looks, Be bright and jovial among your guests to-night. MACBETH So shall I, love, and so I pray be you.

Quotes in Context: "All The Perfumes Of Arabia Will Not Sweeten This Little Hand"

Context: Lady Macbeth receives a letter from her husband telling her of the prophetic words of three witches that he will become king. When the chance comes to kill King Duncan as he sleeps, an overnight visitor in Macbeth's castle, Lady Macbeth urges Macbeth to murder his liege and cousin and to usurp the throne. The deed is done, Macbeth is crowned king, and yet the queen does not enjoy her new estate. Finally insane, Lady Macbeth is obsessed with the murder of Duncan and the idea that his blood would not wash off her hands after she had smeared it upon the grooms who slept by their king.

LADY MACBETH Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh! DOCTOR What a sigh is there! The heart is sorely charged. GENTLEWOMAN I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body. DOCTOR Well, well, well. GENTLEWOMAN Pray God it be sir. DOCTOR This disease is beyond my practice. Yet I have known those which have walked in their sleep who have died holiy in their beds.

Quotes in Context: "Angels Are Bright Still, Though The Brightest Fell"

Context: Duncan, King of Scotland, is murdered in his sleep. His sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, carrying in their persons the future of their House, wisely flee, Malcolm to England, Donalbain to Ireland, to wait for calmer times. Macbeth, the present king, murdered Duncan, put the blame on Malcolm and Donalbain, and usurped the throne. He becomes a bloody tyrant with whom no man is safe. There is discontent in Scotland. One nobleman, Macduff, departs Scotland to join Malcolm in England. Now, they are discussing the lamentable conditions in Scotland, and Malcolm hopes Macduff's looks are an index to his loyalty.
MACDUFF: I am not treacherous.
MALCOLM: But Macbeth is. A good and virtuous nature may recoil in an imperial charge. But I shall crave your pardon. That which you are, my thoughts cannot transpose: Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell. Though all things foul would wear the brows of grace, Yet grace must still look so.

Quotes in Context: "Aroint Thee Witch The Rump-fed Ronyon Cries"

Context: Macbeth and Banquo, generals in the army of King Duncan of Scotland, pass along a heath near Forres as they return home from a battle in which they have successfully put down a rebellion against the king. Three witches await their approach to pronounce the words of prophecy that Macbeth, who is Thane of Glamis, will bear the titles of Thane of Cawdor and finally king, and that the heirs of Banquo will ascend the throne. As the witches wait, they discuss their day’s adventures, the first witch filling her sisters with indignation as she tells them of the way a despicable, mangy (ronyon) sailor's wife, fat-bottomed from eating refuse (rump-fed) refused to share with her the chestnuts she is eating, yelling at her to be gone.

FIRST WITCH: A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap. And munched, and munched, and munched. Give me, quoth I. Aroint thee witch the rump-fed ronyon cries. Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o'th' Tiger; But in a sieve I'll thither sail, And like a rat without a tail, I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.

Quotes in Context: "Blood Will Have Blood"

Context: Macbeth orders Banquo and his son, Fleance, murdered the night of his feast. The murderers kill Banquo, but Fleance escapes. One of the murderers comes to tell Macbeth what has happened just as the celebration is beginning. Macbeth, knowing full well Banquo is dead, wishes for his presence and is confronted by his wounded and gory ghost sitting in the place of honor. Shocked almost into madness, Macbeth babbles of blood and murders. Lady Macbeth hastily excuses him on grounds of an old infirmity, but when the ghost returns a second time, Macbeth is completely unnerved. Lady Macbeth asks the guests to leave immediately. Macbeth is sure the ghost is a horrible omen of things to come.

LADY MACBETH: I pray you speak not; he grows worse and worse. Question enrages him. At once, good night... MACBETH: It will have blood, they say; blood will have blood. Stones have been known to move, and trees to speak. Augurs and understood relations have By maggot-pies and choughs and rooks brought forth The secret'st man of blood. What is the night?

Quotes in Context: "Cry, Hold, Hold!"

Context: Lady Macbeth receives a letter from her husband. In it he relates how witches told him he was to be Thane of Cawdor, and afterwards to be king; and shortly thereafter, he relates, emissaries from King Duncan confirmed the first part of the prophecy. He is Thane of Cawdor, and she resolves, he shall be king, but she worries that Macbeth is "too full o' th' milk of human kindness" to kill the king and take the throne. On the heels of the letter, arrives word that King Duncan is coming to Macbeth’s castle to spend the night. Instantly she resolves that Duncan shall not leave the castle alive. Ambitious and ruthless, Lady Macbeth invokes the spirits of hell to steel her to murder.

LADY MACBETH: ... Come you spirits That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood, ... Come to my
woman's breasts. And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers. Wherever in your sightless substances you wait on nature's mischief. Come thick night, and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell. That my keen knife see not the wound it makes, nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark. To cry, hold, hold!

Quotes in Context: "Double, Double Toil And Trouble"

Context: Three witches prophesy Macbeth's rise from general to Thane of Cawdor to King of Scotland, and all comes true. But he pays a bloody price, for he murders King Duncan to usurp his throne, and he has Banquo, a former fellow-general, slain because he fears him and his sons as future usurpers of his own place. He wants to know more: what is yet in store for him. The witches, assembled in a cavern to await his coming, are shrieking and screaming around a bubbling caldron. Thunder accompanies their weird incantations.

FIRST WITCHRound about the caldron go; In the poisoned entrails throw. Toad, that under cold stone Days and nights has thirty-one Sweltered venom sleeping got. Boil thou first i' th' charmed pot. AllDouble, double toil and trouble; Fire burn, and caldron bubble.

Quotes in Context: "Eye Of Newt"

Context: Macbeth and Banquo are advised by three witches that Macbeth will become king and that the descendants of Banquo will be monarchs. Macbeth, driven by his own evil ambition and that of his wife, murders Duncan, his king, his cousin, and his over-night guest. Though the crown is given to Macbeth, the new king is worried because the two sons of Duncan remain in exile, and, though Banquo has been murdered, Fleance, his son, has escaped Macbeth's hired assassins. Macbeth prepares to visit the oracles who gave him the former prophecy. In the meantime, the witches fix a charm by preparing a boiling caldron, taking turns casting hideous and venomous objects into the stew and muttering incantations.

SECOND WITCHFillet of a fenny snake, In the caldron boil and bake; Eye of newt, and toe of frog, Wool of bat, and tongue of dog, Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting, Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing; For a charm of powerful trouble, Like a hell-broth boil and bubble. AllDouble, double toil and trouble; Fire burn, and caldron bubble.

Quotes in Context: "Fair Is Foul, And Foul Is Fair"

Context: Three witches, shrieking and screeching in a storm, illumined by lightning and accompanied by thunder, tell us they shall come together again before sunset on a heath to meet a general in Scottish King Duncan's army, named Macbeth. Before they depart, the witches half scream, half chant a rhymed couplet that gives a mysterious, chilling tone to the play.

AllFair is foul, and foul is fair; Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Quotes in Context: "God's Soldier Be He"

Context: In the final act of the drama, Macbeth, who has usurped the crown of Scotland and established himself as a bloody tyrant, is besieged in his castle at Dunsinane by an English army under the command of Siward, Earl of Northumberland. Macbeth, however, feels secure by reason of the promises given him by the three witches that he cannot be defeated "until/Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill/Shall come against him," and that "none of woman born" can harm him. The first of these assurances is destroyed when Malcolm, rightful heir to the Scottish throne, orders each soldier in the English army to hew a branch from the trees in
Birnam wood and carry it before him so that the size of the attacking forces may be concealed. As a result of this stratagem, the watchers on the castle walls are given the impression that the forest is indeed moving towards "high Dunsinane hill." In a last desperate attempt, although he has grown weary of life, Macbeth orders a sortie, and the battle is joined. The first of his enemies to confront him is young Siward, son of the English commander, who is killed in a hand-to-hand fight with the usurper. When the old earl receives this news, he is concerned only with knowing whether his son fought and died bravely, as a soldier should. His conversation with Ross is as follows:

ROSS
Your son my lord, has paid a soldier's debt. He only lived but till he was a man, The which no sooner had his prowess confirmed In the unshrinking station where he fought, But like a man he died...  

SIWARD
Had he his hurts before?
ROSS
Ay, on the front.
SIWARD
Why then, God's soldier be he. Had I as many sons as I have hairs, I would not wish them to a fairer death. And so his knell is knolled.

Quotes in Context: "Good Digestion Wait On Appetite"

Context: Three witches intercept Macbeth and Banquo along a heath and disclose to the warriors that Macbeth will rise in power until finally he becomes king, but that the heirs of Banquo will eventually receive the throne. Driven by his own ambition and that of his wife, Macbeth murders King Duncan of Scotland and usurps the throne. Since Banquo and his son Fleance stand in the way of the new king, Macbeth plans a banquet to which they will be invited, secretly hiring assassins to murder them before the banquet takes place. After the guests have assembled, one of the murderers draws Macbeth aside and informs him that Banquo has been killed but that Fleance has escaped. The whispered conversation between Macbeth and the murderer lasts so long a time that Lady Macbeth, in order to allay any suspicion on the part of the guests, has to remind her husband that he has forgotten his duties as a host.

LADY MACBETH
My royal lord, you do not give the cheer. The feast is sold That is not often vouched, while 'tis a-making, 'Tis given with welcome. To feed were best at home; From thence, the sauce to meat is ceremony, Meeting were bare without it. [Enter GHOST OF BANQUO and sits in MACBETH'S seat.]  
MACBETH
Sweet remembrancer! Now good digestion wait on appetite, and health on both.  
LENNOX
May't please your Highness sit.  
MACBETH
Here had we now our country's honour roofed, Were the graced person of our Banquo present; . . .

Quotes in Context: "I Bear A Charmed Life"

Context: Macbeth, King of Scotland by grace of murder, false accusation, and usurpation, is told by apparitions, conjured by three witches, that he (1) must avoid Macduff, the Thane of Fife, (2) that he need fear no man born of woman, and (3) that he shall not be vanquished until Great Birnam wood shall come to Dunsinane, Macbeth's castle. English and loyal Scots forces, under the command of Malcolm, lawful claimant to the throne, approach the castle, each man carrying a tree branch, thus fulfilling the third part of the prophecy. They broach the castle's defenses and enter. During the fighting, Macbeth has avoided Macduff, but now, cornered, he must fight the Thane of Fife. Although Macbeth admits he has avoided Macduff, he is still confident of invulnerability, believing that Macduff was born of woman.

MACBETH
Let fall thy blade on vulnerable crests; I bear a charmed life, which must not yield To one of woman born. MACDUFF
Despair thy charm, and let the angel whom thou still hast served Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripped.
Quotes in Context: "I Dare Do All That May Become A Man"

Context: Ambitious Macbeth, general in King Duncan of Scotland's army, is told by three witches that he shall be made Thane of Cawdor, and afterwards shall be king. The apparitions disappear. Word is soon brought that the king indeed has made him Thane of Cawdor for meritorious military service. The first part of the prophecy is true. Perhaps the second will be true also. The king decides to spend the night at Macbeth's castle, and Macbeth precedes him to prepare for his coming. Lady Macbeth, more ambitious and ruthless than her husband, immediately thinks of assassination as a means to hurry the future and urges her husband to do the deed. He has misgivings. He decides against it and tells Lady Macbeth his decision. She upbraids him, rallies him to his forgotten purpose, and subtly insults his manhood.

   LADY MACBETH. . . Would'st thou have thatWhich thou esteem'st the ornament of life,And live a coward in thine own esteem,Letting I dare not wait upon I would,Like the poor cat i' th' adage?MACBETHPrithie peace. I dare do all that may become a man;Who dares do more is none.

Quotes in Context: "I Must Become A Borrower Of The Night"

Context: Duncan has been murdered, and Macbeth, on the disappearance of Malcolm and Donalbain, sons of the dead king, has been named sovereign. Nature is in a turmoil, but Macbeth has ordered a feast at which he wishes Banquo's presence. Banquo, however, in a short soliloquy, reveals his suspicions of foul play on Macbeth's part. He also reminds himself of the witches' prophecy that he shall be "the root and father/ Of many kings." He has to leave with his son, Fleance, but he hopes to be back in time for Macbeth's festivities. Macbeth has other plans, however, for he is afraid of Banquo and Banquo's knowledge of the old hags' words.

   MACBETHRide you this afternoon?BANQUOAye, my good lord.MACBETHWe should have else desired your good advice,Which still hath been both grave and prosperous,In this day's council; but we'll take tomorrow.Is't far you ride?BANQUOAs far, my lord, as will fill up the time'Twixt this and supper. Go not my horse the better,I must become a borrower of the nightFor a dark hour or twain.

Quotes in Context: "Is This A Dagger Which I See Before Me?"

Context: Macbeth, already Thane of Cawdor, has ambitions to be King of Scotland, and thereby fulfill his destiny, foretold him by three witches. His opportunity to usurp the throne is at hand, since King Duncan is an overnight guest in his castle. Lady Macbeth, even less scrupulous and more ambitious than her husband, has no misgivings about regicide, but Macbeth has second thoughts. He decides against the murder, but Lady Macbeth lifts his flagging spirit by upbraiding him and scorning his cowardice. She succeeds in banishing his doubts and restoring his purpose. Now, late at night, with nearly everyone abed and asleep, Macbeth starts on his murderous errand, but his mind tricks him, and he sees a vision.

   MACBETH. . .Is this a dagger which I see before me,The handle toward my hand? Come let me clutch thee.I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.Art thou not, fatal vision, sensibleTo feeling as to sight? . . .There's no such thing,It is the bloody business which informsThus to mine eyes. . . .
Quotes in Context: "Lay On Macduff"

Context: Macbeth, King of Scotland, obtains the throne by means of murder, false accusation, and usurpation. His reign is marked by tyranny and cruelty. No man is safe from bloody Macbeth, and many nobles flee to England to join Malcolm, rightful heir to the throne. One, Macduff, seeks out Malcolm but leaves his family in Scotland. Macbeth, for revenge, has them wiped out. Now, the forces of Malcolm attack Dunsinane, Macbeth's stronghold, broach its defenses, and Macduff corners Macbeth. Macbeth, who believes he has a charmed life, safe from any man born of woman, is told by Macduff that he "was from his mother's womb untimely ripped" and therefore Macbeth is vulnerable. Macbeth despairs; but when Macduff taunts him, he decides to fight.

MACBETH...Yet I will try the last. Before my body I throw my warlike shield. Lay on Macduff, And damned be him that first cries, hold, enough.

Quotes in Context: "Letting I Dare Not Wait Upon I Would"

Context: Macbeth, destined to become King of Scotland according to the prophecy of three witches, wavers in his determination to usurp the throne by murdering King Duncan, his liege, his cousin, and his guest for the night. Lady Macbeth chides her husband for his cowardice, comparing him to the cat, in an adage of Heywood, which would like to eat fish, but does not want to get his feet wet.

MACBETH We will proceed no further in this business. He hath honoured me of late, and I have bought Golden opinions from all sorts of people, Which would be worn now in their newest gloss, Not cast aside so soon... LADY MACBETH... Wouldst thou have that Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life, And live a coward in thine own esteem, Letting I dare not wait upon I would, Like the poor cat i' th' adage?

Quotes in Context: "Life's But A Walking Shadow"

Context: Macbeth, destined to become King of Scotland according to the prophecy he receives from three witches and urged on by his wife in his ambition to obtain the crown, murders King Duncan and seizes the throne. Insecure in his tenure of power, Macbeth commits additional murders. Lady Macbeth, strong in ambition at first, becomes weak from worry over the foul deeds committed by the pair and finally suffers a complete mental and physical collapse, and dies. Macbeth receives word of her death while he watches the advance of an English army commanded by Malcolm, son of the murdered King Duncan. In a well-known speech Macbeth comments on the brevity and futility of life as he sorrow for his dead queen:

MACBETH...To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow, Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, To the last syllable of recorded time; And all our yesterdays have lighted fools The way to a dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more. It is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury Signifying nothing.

Quotes in Context: "Light Thickens, And The Crow Makes Wing"

Context: Macbeth, told by three witches that he shall become king, and driven by a wicked ambition, slays King Duncan and usurps the throne. One evil act leads to another as Macbeth plans the murder of Banquo and
his son Fleance to foil the decree of the witches that the heirs of Banquo shall be kings. As evening approaches and the time draws near for his hired assassins to kill Banquo and Fleance, Macbeth notes the atmosphere of evil in the night, and says to Lady Macbeth:

MACBETH. . . . Light thickens, and the crowMakes wing to th’ rooky wood. Good things of day begin to droop and drowse, Whiles night’s black agents to their preys do rouse. Thou marvel’st at my words; but hold thee still, Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill. So prithee go with me. [Exeunt.]

Quotes in Context: "Make Assurance Double Sure"

Context: Macbeth is extremely unhappy and unsure as king. He revisits the old witches to ask for more prophecy so he may know what to expect. The witches call upon their masters. The first apparition, an armed Head, tells Macbeth to beware of Macduff, whom he had already suspected and feared. An apparition of a bloody child tells him not to fear, for no man of woman born can harm him. Somewhat pacified for a moment, Macbeth almost decides to let Macduff live. However, his usual fear and suspicion overcome him, and he quickly changes his mind and plans for Macduff’s death so that he may hopefully sleep in peace once again— as he did before he murdered Duncan.

SECOND APPARITION Be bloody, bold, and resolute, laugh to scorn The power of man, for none of woman born Shall harm Macbeth. [Descends.] MACBETH Then live Macduff, what need I fear of thee? But yet I’ll make assurance double sure, And take a bond of fate. Thou shalt not live; That I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies, And sleep in spite of thunder.

Quotes in Context: "Memorize Another Golgotha"

Context: A bleeding captain enters early in the second scene of the play to report to Duncan, King of Scotland, and his supporters the progress in the war with "the merciless Macdonwald." Macdonwald is a worthy foe and fights to the last with valor. Macbeth, however, with Banquo’s aid, triumphs. The battlefield is indeed a bloody one and would be as memorable as Golgotha where Christ was crucified. Macbeth then goes on to defeat Sweno of Norway and the rebellious Thane of Cawdor.

CAPTAIN But the Norweyan lord . . . . Began a fresh assault. DUNCAN Dismayed not this Our captains, Macbeth and Banquo? CAPTAIN Yes, As sparrows eagles, or the hare the lion. If I say sooth, I must report they were As cannons overcharged with double cracks, so they Doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe. Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds, Or memorize another Golgotha, I cannot tell— . . .

Quotes in Context: "Minister To A Mind Diseased"

Context: Macbeth, receiving the prophecy of three witches that he will become king, murders King Duncan of Scotland and usurps the throne. In all this and in additional murders Macbeth is abetted by his wife until finally Lady Macbeth lapses into insanity. Macbeth then has two deep concerns: First, an English army is advancing against his forces with the intention of giving the crown to Malcolm, son of the murdered king, and second, Lady Macbeth is critically ill. While receiving reports on the approach of the English army, Macbeth also confers with Lady Macbeth’s doctor:

MACBETH . . . How does your patient, doctor? DOCTOR Not so sick my lord, As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies That keep her from her rest. MACBETH Cure her of
that. Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, Raze out the written troubles of the brain, And with some sweet oblivious antidote Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff Which weighs upon the heart?

DOCTOR Therein the patient Must minister to himself.

Quotes in Context: "More Needs She The Divine Than The Physician"

Context: Lady Macbeth has been ailing and walking in her sleep since Macbeth went to war with England, Malcolm, Macduff, and Siward. A doctor is called, and while one of Lady Macbeth's women is describing her condition to him, Lady Macbeth herself suddenly appears with a taper, sleepwalking. She rubs her hands, trying to remove the imaginary blood from them and speaks of both Duncan's and Banquo's murders. The doctor is shocked, but he is both personally and professionally touched at her sighing laments. He realizes that she is beyond his help as a doctor and commends her to God. His only prescription is that she be constantly watched and kept from harming herself.

DOCTOR Foul whisperings are abroad. Unnatural deeds Do breed unnatural troubles; infected minds To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets. More needs she the divine than the physician. God, God forgive us all. Look after her, Remove from her the means of annoyance, And still keep eyes upon her. So good night. My mind she has mated, and amazed my sight. I think, but dare not speak.

Quotes in Context: "None Of Woman Born Shall Harm Macbeth"

Context: At the play's beginning three witches foretell Macbeth's rise from general to Thane of Cawdor to King of Scotland, and all comes true with some bloody help from Macbeth. He murders King Duncan to usurp his throne, and he has Banquo, a former fellow-general, slain because he fears him and his sons as future usurpers of his own place. Everything the witches told Macbeth has come true. He meets the three weird sisters in a cavern to find out what the future now holds in store for him. They answer his demands by a show of apparitions. An armed head first warns him of Macduff, a Scots nobleman. The second apparition is of a bloody child.

SECOND APPARITION Macbeth, Macbeth, Macbeth! MACBETH Had I three ears, I'd hear thee. SECOND APPARITION Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn The power of man. For none of woman born Shall harm Macbeth.

Quotes in Context: "Nor Heaven Peep Through The Blanket Of The Dark"

Context: Lady Macbeth reads a letter from her husband telling her of the prophetic words delivered to him by three witches: Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, shall become Thane of Cawdor and finally king. The letter adds that already King Duncan has bestowed upon Macbeth the title of Thane of Cawdor as a reward for putting down a rebellion led by Macdonwald and the insurrectionist Thane of Cawdor, who has been executed at the king's command. An attendant interrupts Lady Macbeth to tell her that the king approaches and will spend the night at Inverness, home of Macbeth. Lady Macbeth, fearing her husband lacks the strength to carry out a plot to get Duncan out of the way of his ambition, seizes upon the opportunity of the king's visit to have him
murdered and make Macbeth his successor. In a famous soliloquy Lady Macbeth delivers a speech filled with omens of darkness, invoking the spirits to seal off in her the elements of kindness and to allow the dread deed to be done.

LADY MACBETH. . . The raven himself is hoarseThat croaks the fatal entrance of DuncanUnder my battlements. . . . . . . Come thick night,And pall thee in the dunnet smoke of hellThat my keen knife see not the wound it makes,Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,To cry, hold, hold!

Quotes in Context: "Nothing In His Life Became Him Like The Leaving It"

Context: The army of King Duncan of Scotland, led by Macbeth and Banquo, successfully puts down a rebellion of Macdonwald and the Thane of Cawdor. Macdonwald meets death in battle at the hand of Macbeth, and the Thane of Cawdor is condemned to die by the decree of the king. Duncan, awaiting news of the execution, is assured by his son Malcolm that, though the executioners have not returned, reports have come of the death of Thane of Cawdor.

MALCOLMMy liege, They are not yet come back. But I have spoke With one that saw him die; who did report, That very frankly he confessed his treasons, Implored your Highness' pardon, and set forth A deep repentance. Nothing in his life Became him like the leaving it. He died, As one that had been studied in his death, To throw away the dearest thing he owed, As 'twere a careless trifle. DUNCAN There's no art To find the mind's construction in the face. He was a gentleman, on whom I built An absolute trust. . . .

Quotes in Context: "Out Damned Spot, Out I Say!"

Context: Macbeth, general in King Duncan of Scotland's army, is to be Thane of Cawdor and later king, according to three witches' prophecies. He is made Thane of Cawdor for meritorious military service, and the king, being in the neighborhood of Macbeth's castle, stays overnight. Impatient and ambitious, Macbeth, with his wife's help, murders the king in his sleep. Macbeth escapes blame, and, the king's son having fled, is elected and crowned king. He becomes a bloody tyrant in the land. Lady Macbeth had not shrunk from the murder of Duncan, and, subsequently, in her waking hours, is superbly in command of herself. But while she sleeps, her suppressed emotions and stifled conscience demand expression. She walks in her sleep, crying out in conscience-tortured anguish, reliving the night of the regicide.

LADY MACBETH Out damned spot, out I say! One–two–why, then 'tis time to do 't. Hell is murky. Fie my lord, fie! A soldier, and afraid? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?

Quotes in Context: "Out, Out, Brief Candle!"

Context: Macbeth, at Dunsinane in full armor, is ready to fight the advancing enemy when he hears a cry from the women within the castle. He has become so inured to horrors, however, that he hardly fears another lament. Seton, his armor-bearer, is sent to discover the cause of the mourning. He returns with the news of the queen's death. There is no visible breakdown whatsoever on Macbeth's part, although the pace of his speech slows considerably, and he becomes very philosophical. Life signifies nothing, he says; therefore, since she would have died at some time or another, Lady Macbeth's death does not greatly affect him at that moment.
At the entrance of a messenger, his tone alters radically, and he again becomes the war-like commander.

SETON The Queen, my lord, is dead. MACBETH She should have died hereafter; There would have been a time for such a word. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, Creeps in this petty pace from day to day; To the last syllable of recorded time; And all our yesterdays have lighted fools The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player. That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more. It is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury Signifying nothing.

Quotes in Context: "Present Fears Are Less Than Horrible Imaginings"

Context: Macbeth and Banquo, generals in the army of King Duncan of Scotland, have distinguished themselves in putting down a rebellion led by the Thane of Cawdor. The king hears of their deeds and determines to give Macbeth the title of the defeated Thane. Before the emissaries reach Macbeth, however, he and Banquo are informed by three witches that not only shall Macbeth be Thane of Cawdor, but that he shall be king and that Banquo shall be the father of kings. The king's emissaries arrive and confirm the witches' prophecy that Macbeth is to be invested with the title of Thane of Cawdor. If this much is true, thinks ambitious Macbeth, can the complete fulfillment of the witches' prophecy be far behind? Lost in thought, he contemplates regicide as a way to hasten his fortune.

MACBETH [Aside.] This supernatural soliciting Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill Why hath it given me earnest of success, Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor. If good, why do I yield to that suggestion, Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair, And make my seated heart knock at my ribs, Against the use of nature? Present fears Are less than horrible imaginings. . . .

Quotes in Context: "Screw Your Courage To The Sticking-place"

Context: Ambitious Macbeth, already Thane of Cawdor, aspires to be king. He can thus fulfill his destiny, foretold him by three witches. His opportunity to hurry the future is at hand, since King Duncan of Scotland is an overnight guest in his castle. Lady Macbeth, even more ambitious, ruthless, and remorseless than her husband, has no scruples about regicide, but Macbeth has some second thoughts and misgivings. He decides against murder. Lady Macbeth comes to find him while the king and court are banqueting because the king asks for him. He tells her his decision. Immediately she upbraids him for his lack of purpose, his cowardice, and finally, his last lingering doubts.

MACBETH If we should fail? LADY MACBETH We fail? But screw your courage to the sticking-place, And we'll not fail. . . .

Quotes in Context: "Sleep In Spite Of Thunder"

Context: The greatly troubled Macbeth is insecure as king. He revisits the old witches to ask for more prophesy, so that he might know what to expect. The witches perform their incantations. The first apparition, an armed Head, tells Macbeth to beware of Macduff, whom he had already suspected and feared. An apparition of a bloody child tells Macbeth not to fear, for no man of woman born can harm him. Somewhat pacified for the moment, Macbeth almost decides to let Macduff live. However, his usual fear and suspicion
overcome him; he quickly changes his mind and plans for Macduff’s death so that he may sleep in peace once again—as he had slept before he murdered Duncan.

SECOND APPARITION
Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn
The power of man. For none of woman born
Shall harm Macbeth. [Descends.]
MACBETH
Then live Macduff, what need I fear of thee?
But yet I'll make assurance double sure,
And take a bond of fate. Thou shalt not live;
That I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies;
And sleep in spite of thunder.

Quotes in Context: "Sleep That Knits Up The Raveled Sleeve Of Care"

Context: Macbeth, ambitious Thane of Cawdor, aspires to be King of Scotland and thus fulfill his destiny prophesied by three witches. After successfully subduing a rebellion, King Duncan stays the night at Inverness, Macbeth's castle, and so opportunity is at hand to hasten the future by assassination. Macbeth contemplates regicide but decides against it. Lady Macbeth, even more ambitious and ruthless than her husband, by means of cajolery, encouragement, and scorn, restores his purpose. In the dead of night, with all abed, Macbeth murders Duncan in his sleep. Now, frightened, remorseful, heavy with foreboding, Macbeth, as in a trance, tells his Lady that he thought he heard someone cry out as he was doing murder.

MACBETH
Methought I heard a voice cry, sleep no more.
Macbeth does murder sleep, the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care.
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course, Chief nourisher in life's feast.

Quotes in Context: "Stand Not Upon The Order Of Your Going"

Context: Macbeth, an ambitious general in King Duncan of Scotland's army, is to be king, and his fellow general, Banquo, is to be the father of kings, according to three witches' prophecy. Macbeth hurries fortune by murdering the king, fastening blame on others, and then being elected and crowned king. But he proves to be a bloody tyrant, and, because he has no heir, he fears Banquo. Banquo may kill him to seat his progeny on the throne in accordance with the prophecy. Macbeth has Banquo murdered, but Fleance, Banquo's son, escapes. Now, at a banquet, Banquo's ghost appears twice to Macbeth. The second time, Macbeth causes such an uproar that the feast is hopelessly ruined. Lady Macbeth takes charge when guests question her husband.

LADY MACBETH
I pray you speak not; he grows worse and worse.
Question enrages him. At once, good night.
Stand not upon the order of your going, But go at once.

Quotes in Context: "The Lord's Anointed Temple"

Context: Forewarned by the prophecy of three witches of his destiny to become King of Scotland and spurred on by an ambitious wife, Macbeth murders Duncan, his king, his kinsman, and his over-night guest. The corpse is discovered by Macduff, a nobleman charged with the duty of awakening the king. Referring to the king as "the Lord's anointed temple," Macduff reports the murder.

MACDUFF
O horror, horror, horror! Tongue nor heart Cannot conceive nor name thee.
MACBETH and LENNOX
What's the matter? MACDUFF
Confusion now hath made his masterpiece.
Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope
The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence
The life o' th' building.
MACBETH
What is't you say—the life?
LENNOX
Mean you his
Majesty?MACDUFFApproach the chamber, and destroy your sightWith a new Gorgon. Do not bid me speak. See, and then speak yourselves.

Quotes in Context: "The Deep Damnation Of His Taking Off"

Context: In a well-known soliloquy, Macbeth, forewarned by the prophecy of three witches that he will be "King hereafter" and spurred on by the determination of Lady Macbeth, debates murdering King Duncan, his kinsman, his king, and, this night, his guest.

MACBETH. . . He's here in double trust; First, as I am his kinsman, and his subject, Strong both against the deed; then, as his host, Who should against his murderer shut the door, Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been So clear in his great office, that his virtues Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against The deep damnation of his taking-off. . . . . I have no spur To prick the sides of my intent, but only Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself, And falls on th'other--

Quotes in Context: "The Imperial Theme"

Context: Macbeth and Banquo meet the witches who inform them that Macbeth will be Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland, and that Banquo will beget kings. As the witches vanish, Ross and Angus appear to tell Macbeth of the praises and rewards heaped upon him by King Duncan— one of which is the title of the Thane of Cawdor, stripped from the traitor whom Macbeth had defeated along with Sweno of Norway. Both Macbeth and Banquo are startled at how suddenly the prophecy of the witches comes true. Banquo is dubious of the "instruments of darkness" and their words, for he fears betrayal. Macbeth too is really torn between a feeling of good and evil and cannot understand why he is so stunned and frightened when part of the tidings has already been fulfilled. He becomes deeply absorbed in his own thoughts, which dwell constantly on the last part of the prediction.

MACBETH [aside] Two truths are told, As happy prologues to the swelling act Of the imperial theme. . . . . This supernatural soliciting Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill, Why hath it given me earnest of success, Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor. If good, why do I yield to that suggestion, Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair, And make my seated heart knock at my ribs, Against the use of nature? . . . .

Quotes in Context: "The Insane Root That Takes The Reason Prisoner"

Context: Macbeth and Banquo, generals in the army of Duncan, King of Scotland, pass along a heath near Forres as they return home after successfully putting down a rebellion against their king. Suddenly three witches appear from the gloom and hail the warriors with the prophecy that Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, will receive the titles Thane of Cawdor and king, and that Banquo, though he will not become king, will beget kings. The fateful words spoken, the witches disappear, leaving Macbeth and Banquo stunned and wondering if they have eaten something to make them have visions, possibly the root of hemlock.

BANQUO The earth has bubbles, as the water has, And these are of them. Whither are they vanished? MACBETH Into the air; and what seemed corporal melted, As breath into the wind. Would they had stayed. BANQUO Were such things here, as we do speak about? Or have we eaten on the insane root That takes the reason prisoner? MACBETH Your children shall be kings. BANQUO You shall be king. MACBETH And Thane of Cawdor too—went it not
so?

BANQUOTo the selfsame tune and words.

Quotes in Context: "The Milk Of Human Kindness"

Context: Lady Macbeth, in her castle at Inverness, has received a letter from her husband, with the story of his encounter with three witches who hailed him as Thane of Cawdor and as "King hereafter." While still overcome with astonishment at their prophecy, he receives word that, for his valor in battle, he had indeed been created Thane of Cawdor in place of the rebel thane who had conspired with Norway against Scotland. The sudden fulfilment of part of the witches' prophecy has fired Macbeth's ambition: he may yet be king. But his wife, more clear-sighted and more ruthless than he, knows that her husband may well lack the strength of mind needed to achieve the goal he seeks. In her soliloquy she analyzes her husband's character and resolves to bolster his weakness with her greater strength.

LADY MACBETHGlamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt beWhat thou art promised: yet do I fear thy nature;It is too full o' the milk of human kindnessTo catch the nearest way... . . .

Quotes in Context: "The Primrose Way"

Context: Macbeth, at his wife's insistence, has just murdered Duncan, and in so doing has "murdered" sleep, "the innocent sleep,/ Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleave of care, The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath." Lady Macbeth has taken the bloody daggers back, to lay them, smeared with blood, beside the sleeping grooms. As the two guilty people look down at their bloody hands, there is a knocking at the gate without. The porter, protesting against being roused at this hour, goes to open it, and to admit Macduff and Lennox. Before opening the gate, however, the Porter makes several comments, typified by the following:

PORTER. . . Knock, knock. Never at quiet. What are you? But this place is too cold for hell. I'll devil-porter it no further. I had thought to have let in some of all professions, that go the primrose way to th' everlasting bonfire. . . .

Quotes in Context: "The Sear, The Yellow Leaf"

Context: Now heard more familiarly as "sere and yellow leaf time of life," the sense is quite the same as Macbeth means it: fast-approaching age. In the play, Macbeth, Thane of Cawdor, usurps the throne of Scotland by murdering the lawful King Duncan and fixing the blame on others. But its has been a fitful, bloody reign. Lady Macbeth, who aided him in murder, has a sick conscience, and Macbeth sees enemies on every side. King Duncan's son, Malcolm, who fled to England when his father was assassinated, is now returning with loyal Scotsmen and English forces to wrest the throne from Macbeth. Macbeth, assured by three witches that he has a charmed life, that no one born of woman can kill him, and that he is safe until Great Birnam wood walks to his stronghold, is nevertheless sick at heart, and, awaiting attack by Malcolm, he faces the emptiness of his life.

MACBETH. . . I have lived long enough. My way of lifeIs fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf,And that which should accompany old age,As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,I must not look to have; but in their steadCurses, not loud but deep, . . .

Quotes in Context: "The Wine Of Life Is Drawn"

Context: Macbeth, Thane of Cawdor, and his wife have great and impatient ambitions. He aspires to be King of Scotland. He murders King Duncan, an overnight guest in his castle, in his sleep in order to usurp the
throner and thus fulfill the prophecy of three witches who told Macbeth that he would become king. Now, the next morning, two noblemen arrive to see King Duncan. Macbeth greets them. One, Macduff, goes to the king's chamber, finds the king dead, and rouses the house. Macbeth feigns surprise and dismay at the news of the regicide.

MACBETHHad I but died an hour before this chance, I had lived a blessed time; for from this instant, there's nothing serious in mortality. All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead. The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees is left this vault to brag of.

Quotes in Context: "Therein The Patient Must Minister To Himself"

Context: Macbeth obtains the throne of Scotland by assassinating the lawful King Duncan while the latter is a guest in his castle, and fastening the blame on the king's two sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, who flee. The usurper and his wife Lady Macbeth, who aided him in his murderous act, have an unquiet, tyrannous reign. No one is safe from Macbeth, who sees enemies on every side. More and more nobles flee to join Malcolm. Now Lady Macbeth, whose sick conscience will not let her sleep, is near death, and Malcolm's forces from England, swelled by loyal Scotsmen, approach to attack the tyrant's stronghold. As Macbeth awaits the onslaught, he and Lady Macbeth's doctor discuss her treatment.

MACBETH. . . Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, Raze out the written troubles of the brain, And with some sweet oblivious antidote Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff Which weighs upon the heart? DOCTOR Therein the patient Must minister to himself.

Quotes in Context: "There's Daggers In Men's Smiles"

Context: The household of Macbeth is awakened by the knocking of Macduff and Lennox, who have come to call on the king. Macduff goes to seek him and finds him dead. Aghast, he reports to Macbeth and Lennox who go to see for themselves. Lady Macbeth, Malcolm, and Donalbain are roused and the king's sons informed of his murder, done supposedly by his chamber-men, who were found covered with blood and in possession of bloody daggers. Macbeth, however, when he goes to see the body, kills them, supposedly in a rage of violent feeling, but actually to keep them from talking. Malcolm, Duncan's heir, and Donalbain, the younger son, fear for their lives and decide to leave in the confusion. They are suspicious of all, and because of their position, they feel they will be safer elsewhere.

MALCOLM. . . Let's not consort with them. To show an unfelt sorrow is an office Which the false man does easy. I'll to England. DONALBAIN To Ireland, I. Our separated fortune Shall keep us both the safer. Where we are, There's daggers in men's smiles; the near in blood, The nearer bloody. MALCOLM This murderous shaft that's shot Hath not yet lighted, and our safest way Is to avoid the aim. Therefore to horse, And let us not be dainty of leave-taking, But shift away. . . .

Quotes in Context: "'Tis The Eye Of Childhood That Fears A Painted Devil"

Context: Macbeth, Thane of Cawdor, has ambitions to be King of Scotland and thus fulfill his destiny prophesied by three witches. He helps King Duncan subdue a rebellion near his demesne, and that night the
king is Macbeth’s guest. Opportunity to hasten his future by means of regicide is given him; he considers murder, but decides against it. Lady Macbeth, even more ambitious and less scrupulous than her husband, urges, encourages, and scorns him into undertaking the deed. Macbeth murders Duncan in his sleep. Now, vision-ridden, remorseful, heavy with foreboding, Macbeth refuses to return to Duncan's bed chamber to smear the sleeping grooms with blood and leave the daggers with them to point blame in their direction. Lady Macbeth upbraids him.

MACBETH I'll go no more. I am afraid, to think what I have done. Look on't again I dare not. LADY MACBETH Infirm of purpose! Give me the daggers. The sleeping, and the dead are but as pictures. 'Tis the eye of childhood that fears a painted devil. If he do bleed, I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal, for it must seem their guilt.

Quotes in Context: "'Twere Well It Were Done Quickly"

Context: Macbeth, general in King Duncan of Scotland's army, is told by three witches that he shall be Thane of Cawdor and afterward king. Immediately following the disappearance of the apparitions, he is told the king has made him Thane of Cawdor as reward for outstanding service. Therefore, if the first part of the prophecy came true, so will the second; and if so, why not hurry it along with the assistance of a murder? But Macbeth puts the thought from his mind. He writes to his wife, who, more ambitious than her lord, immediately thinks of murder as the way to the throne, and as if to aid her cause, the king comes to Macbeth's castle to spend a night. Before he arrives, Macbeth comes home, and Lady Macbeth tells him to leave the bloody business to her. Now King Duncan arrives and Macbeth, alone, speaks his thoughts. He is apprehensive of the consequences of assassination.

MACBETH If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly. If th' assassination could trammel up the consequence, and catch with his surcease, success; that but this blow might be the be-all and the end-all—here, but here, upon this bank and shoal of time, we'd jump the life to come. But in these cases, we still have judgment here, that we but teach bloody instructions, which being taught return to plague th' inventor. . . .

Quotes in Context: "Vaulting Ambition, Which O'er Leaps Itself"

Context: Informed by three witches that he is to be Thane of Cawdor and later king, Macbeth, valiant general of King Duncan of Scotland's army, is soon brought word that he indeed has been made Thane of Cawdor for meritorious military service, and thus the first part of the prophecy is fulfilled. Macbeth brings King Duncan home with him to spend the night. His wife, Lady Macbeth, immediately plans regicide as a means of hurrying the second half of the witches' prophecy. Ambitious, ruthless, cruel, she anticipates no remorse, but Macbeth, "too full o' th' milk of human kindness," has second thoughts and misgivings about murdering Duncan. He ruefully concludes he can find no excuse for regicide save his own ambition.

MACBETH He's here in double trust; first, as I am his kinsman, and his subject. Strong both against the deed; then, as his host. Who should against his murderer shut the door, Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan Hath born his faculties so meek, hath been so clear in his great office, . . . I have no spur To prick the sides of my intent, but only Vaulting ambition, which o'er leaps itself, and falls on th' other—
Quotes in Context: "We Have Scotched The Snake, Not Killed It"

Context: Macbeth, promised by witches that he will be king, murders King Duncan of Scotland and usurps the throne. However, certain obstacles remain: (1) the witches advise that the heirs of Banquo shall be kings, (2) the sons of the slain king live in exile, and (3) in gaining power Macbeth has lost peace. Lady Macbeth encourages her lord to forget the past, but Macbeth says that their difficulties have not yet been overcome.

LADY MACBETH. . .How now my lord, why do you keep alone,Of sorriest fancies your companions making.Using those thoughts which should indeed have diedWith them they think on? Things without all remedyShould be without regard: what's done is done.MACBETHWe have scotched the snake, not killed it.She'll close, and be herself, whilst our poor maliceRemains in danger of her former tooth.But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer,Ere we will eat our meal in fear, and sleepIn the affliction of these terrible dreamsThat shake us nightly. Better be with the dead,Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,Than on the torture of the mind to lieIn restless ecstasy. . . .

Quotes in Context: "What Man Dare, I Dare"

Context: Macbeth and Banquo, generals in King Duncan of Scotland's army, are told by three witches that Macbeth shall be Thane of Cawdor and afterwards king, and that Banquo shall be the father of kings. Shortly, word is brought that the king has made Macbeth Thane of Cawdor for brilliant military service. Macbeth, ambitious and impatient, assassinates King Duncan in his sleep. The blame is fastened on the king's sons who, fearing for their own safety, flee, one to England, the other to Ireland. Thus, hastening his future through regicide, Macbeth is elected and crowned King of Scotland. But he is uneasy. Because he has no heir, he fears Banquo will kill him to secure his own line in accordance with the witches' prophecy. He plans a banquet and invites Banquo and his son Fleance, but arranges to have them murdered en route. Banquo is killed, but Fleance escapes. Now, informed of Banquo's death, he is about to partake of the banquet when Banquo's ghost appears at the table. Only Macbeth can see it, and is frightened. The banquet continues. The ghost appears again. Macbeth is greatly perturbed and causes a commotion as Lady Macbeth tries to calm him. He stares at the ghost.

MACBETHWhat man dare, I dare.Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,The armed rhinoceros, or the Hycan tiger,Take any shape but that, and my firm nervesShall never tremble.. . .

Quotes in Context: "What's Done Is Done"

Context: Macbeth, Thane of Cawdor, murders King Duncan of Scotland, hoping to hasten the fulfillment of a prophecy by three witches that he shall soon be king. Impatient and ambitious, he assassimates the king in his sleep while the latter is a guest in his castle. Lady Macbeth smears the king's grooms with blood, thereby fastening blame on them. The death discovered and the house aroused, Macbeth slays the king's grooms, claiming they are instruments of murder. The king's sons, aware of treachery and afraid for their lives, flee, one to England, the other to Ireland. Because of their flight, suspicion fastens upon them as perpetrators of the crime, and Macbeth is elected King of Scotland. But he is not content, for he fears Banquo, a former fellow-general whom the witches prophesied would be the begetter of kings. Because Macbeth has no heir, the fact that Banquo's offspring shall gain the throne rankles in him, and he plans to have Banquo and his son Fleance murdered. As he plots, Lady Macbeth sends for him. He comes, brooding. She misreads his thoughts, thinking he is conscience-stricken.
LADY MACBETH

How now my lord, why do you keep alone, Of sorriest fancies your companions making, Using those thoughts which should indeed have died With them they think on? Things without all remedy Should be without regard: what's done is done.

**Quotes in Context: "Who Would Have Thought The Old Man To Have Had So Much Blood In Him"**

Context: Lady Macbeth learns that three witches or "weird sisters" have prophesied that Macbeth will become king. When the opportunity arises to murder King Duncan as he rests, a guest in her home, the lady chides Macbeth if he should fail to murder the king and seize the throne. Yet when the deed is accomplished and the power is gained and numerous other murders have been committed, Lady Macbeth does not enjoy her royal estate; instead, she lapses into insanity. A lady in attendance and a doctor observe the deranged queen as she walks and talks in her sleep, reliving the murder of King Duncan.

LADY MACBETH . . . Fie my lord, fie! A soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?

DOCTOR Do you mark that?

LADY MACBETH The Thane of Fife had a wife; where is she now? What, will these hands ne'er be clean? No more o'that my lord, no more o' that; you mar all with this starting.

DOCTOR Go to, go to! You have known what you should not.

**Character and Theme Quotes: Essential Passage by Character: Macbeth**

MACBETH:

*Aside.* This supernatural soliciting

Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,

Why hath it given me earnest of success,

Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.

If good, why do I yield to that suggestion

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair

And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,

Against the use of nature? Present fears

Are less than horrible imaginings:

My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,

Shakes so my single state of man that function

Is smother’d in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not.

BANQUO:

Look, how our partner’s rapt.

MACBETH:

[Aside.] If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me
Without my stir.

BANQUO:

New honors come upon him,
Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mould
But with the aid of use.

MACBETH:

[Aside.] Come what come may,
Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.

Act 1, Scene 3, Lines 141-162

Summary

Macbeth, along with Banquo, has been visited by three witches who prophesy that Macbeth, now Thane of Glamis, will become Thane of Cawdor and then King of Scotland. Almost immediately, Ross and Angus, two Scottish nobles, arrive to inform Macbeth that the previous Thane of Cawdor has been captured and has forfeited his position through rebellion against King Duncan. The title thus falls to Macbeth as a reward for his services to the crown. Although Banquo initially has some doubts as to the validity of a prophecy from witches, the fulfillment is convincing. He is concerned, however, that it may be an instance of the powers of evil telling the truth in order to recruit a susceptible person to the side of darkness. Macbeth can see only that the witches speak truth, that the three-part prophecy is two-thirds of the way fulfilled.

As Banquo speaks privately to Ross and Angus, Macbeth in the passage above ponders the meaning of the prophecy. He is unsure about the nature of the words of the witches (“This supernatural soliciting/Cannot be ill, cannot be good”) and is thus in a completely gray area. If it is evil, why is he given assured success, verified by truth? He can see only one way that the remainder of the prophecy (i.e., his succeeding to the throne of Scotland) will come true, and that is through the death of King Duncan. That death, in Macbeth’s mind, can be accomplished by only one manner to assure that Macbeth is his heir: murder. Macbeth trembles at the thought that he must commit this murder. He momentarily sees that, if fate is willing for him to be king, then fate will handle the details without his stirring. However, if the opportunity presents itself through the machinations of fate, he would be wrong not to accept that opportunity.
Analysis

With the use of the aside in this passage, Shakespeare allows Macbeth to have a type of soliloquy, even with others present. The soliloquy presents the path of thought of the character, revealing his inner struggle with the choices that are presented to him. Soliloquies usually present a tipping point for the character. It is the decision that he makes that will decide the course of his life and thus whether the play becomes a tragedy (where the hero is defeated through a fatal flaw) or a comedy (where the hero achieves his goals or overcomes an obstacle to gain an even more honorable position).

Macbeth is at the threshold, the choice of whether to choose good or to choose evil. As the tragic hero, he has achieved through his own efforts great renown and acclaim. He has been honored by his country and his king. To rise to the level of the Thane of Cawdor gives him power, wealth, and respect. The fact that Macbeth rose to this level through the way of honor reflects strongly and positively on his character.

Yet he has now been presented with promise of more. The three witches simply tell him that he will be king. They do not tell him by what route he will arrive at the throne. The implication is that it is already decided, without any concentrated effort by Macbeth. Yet Macbeth is not willing to sit back and do nothing. He received the thaneship of Cawdor through his valor. He cannot contemplate receiving the throne through any other measure.

Although up until now Macbeth is presented as an honorable man, the revelation of his thinking process at this point reveals his fatal flaw. Through pride, through hubris, Macbeth cannot imagine that fate has more power than he. In a complete rejection of God or fate, Macbeth places himself on the throne of God, in the place of fate, and assumes control. He will reach his goal through the quickest, though not the most honorable, route: murder. Through this choice, Macbeth’s destruction is assured. In the very first act, then, the audience knows how the play will end.

So quickly does Macbeth fall that instead of just contemplating one murder, he is willing to commit more. King Duncan has named his oldest son, Malcolm, as his heir and successor to the throne. Macbeth knows that, in order to bring the prophecy to pass, Malcolm as well as Duncan must die. Malcolm must die in the same manner as his father—by the hand of Macbeth. Macbeth quickly accepts the desirability of this. Though unmentioned, Macbeth will also have to kill Donalbain, Duncan’s younger son and presumably the heir after Malcolm.

Macbeth demonstrates that once the line dividing good and evil has been crossed, it is quite easy to proceed deeper into evil. What would have horrified him before he was promised the throne now appears easy.

Macbeth’s religious views seem more pagan than Christian. His concept of “Divine Will” is closer to the ancient belief in “Wyd,” which means “Fate” or “Destiny.” This is an impersonal force that cannot be appealed to through prayer or sacrifice. It is simply what is. It is the Will of the Universe rather than the Will of God. In this light, Macbeth has no fear of divine retribution or punishment. His view is that he must carry out the will of Fate, by “fair means or foul.” To do less would be to displease Fate, leading to unimagined consequences. In this belief, the end justifies the means, a philosophy that, in the archetypal concept of the hero quest, leads swiftly to the destruction of the hero.

Such will be the fate of Macbeth, as well as those who come into contact with him. In the tale of the tragic hero, mere association will involve a person in defeat or destruction. The good and the bad, the innocent and the guilty, men and women and even children will die due to Macbeth’s decision to follow the road of evil.
MACBETH:

If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well
It were done quickly. If the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch,
With his surcease, success; that but this blow
 Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We’d jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgement here, that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which being taught return
To plague the inventor. This even-handed justice
Commends the ingredients of our poison’d chalice
To our own lips. He’s here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels trumpet-tongued against
The deep damnation of his taking-off,
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,

That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur

To prickle the sides of my intent, but only

Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself

And falls on the other—

_Act 1, Scene 7, Lines 1-28_

**Summary**

King Duncan has triumphed over the attacks of the Norwegian troops, aided by the rebel Scots who are led by the previous Thane of Cawdor, Macdonwald. In celebration of his victory, as well as of the accession of Macbeth as the new Thane of Cawdor, Duncan proposes to honor Macbeth with a visit to his castle in Glamis. Macbeth goes ahead to prepare a feast, sending a letter to his wife of the coming company. Macbeth also relates to his wife the full extent of the three witches’ prophecy. Immediately she has jumped ahead of her husband and is more than willing to aid in the murder of the king so that Macbeth can take the throne. More corrupt that her husband, Lady Macbeth has completely sold her soul to evil without regret.

The same cannot now be said of Macbeth himself. He begins to have doubts, becoming somewhat shaky in his resolve. In the soliloquy quoted above, Macbeth contemplates the full extent of his actions. He hesitates, but he knows that if the murder is to be done, it would be best to do it quickly and get it over with. He believes that if Duncan’s assassination would result in complete success, without any consequences, he would be satisfied. But Macbeth now fears that to do so will put his eternal soul at risk, and he realizes that there are likely to be earthly consequences to Duncan’s assassination as well. Though Duncan is dead, Macbeth understands that not everyone will be happy that he, Macbeth, is now king. There may be other battles to fight.

Macbeth contemplates the many reasons why this deed is dishonorable. It is not a “simple” murder. First, Duncan is his kinsman, a near relation. It will be one step short of fratricide. Second, Duncan is his king, and Macbeth will thus be guilty of regicide. But more importantly, Duncan is his guest. Macbeth is bound to protect Duncan, not to murder him.

Macbeth admits that Duncan has been a most worthy king, has “borne his faculties so meek, hath been/So clear in his great office.” Duncan is not a tyrant (such as Macbeth will become) whose death will bring relief to the land. Because Duncan is so honorable, his death will bring great grief to the country and thus turn the popular opinion against Macbeth as his murderer. Macbeth admits that the only justification he has to commit this assassination is his own “vaulting ambition,” knowing that he may jump too far and suffer undesirable consequences.

**Analysis**

In the archetypal hero tale, the hero is presented with two opportunities, two thresholds, to choose good over evil. In the first one, the hero typically refuses evil, choosing to remain true to his honor. Macbeth did not quite turn away at his first opportunity following the encounter with the three witches. In this scene, he is handed by fate another chance to turn back. Macbeth has a much clearer view of the consequences of his actions than he manifested at his first threshold. Rather than living in a delusion, Macbeth clearly and logically analyzes the full ramifications of the assassination. He knows the consequences, both in terms of his
soul and in terms of his status as king. He is not acting in ignorance. He is fully aware of the price he will pay
to take fate in his own hands to fulfill what has been presented to him as his destiny.

Macbeth presents himself as a rather weak hero. His bravery is high when he is in the company of other
warriors, yet he begins to weaken in the presence, and under the domination, of his wife. It is she who has the
stronger resolve, though it be for evil. It is she who must hold up her husband, pushing him to commit the
deed that, in his own weakness, he now has difficulty contemplating. It is only through her despising this
shakiness that he garners the strength enough to kill Duncan. Yet, as events will show, it breaks him mentally,
much sooner than it does his wife.

The characterization of Macbeth in connection with his spiritual views is a bit inconsistent at this point.
Rather than believe in fate, he begins to see that actions have consequences, both in the temporal and eternal
realm. He finally reflects on the status of his soul and asks himself, “Is becoming king worth eternal
damnation?” The inconsistency of his view of spirituality makes this question difficult for him to answer. As
with all tragic heroes, Macbeth struggles with the concept presented by Lucifer in John Milton’s Paradise
Lost: “Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.” Unsure of what the afterlife brings, Macbeth leans more
toward holding earthly glory as of greater worth than whatever comes after death.

Macbeth would be willing to risk eternal damnation if he could “do the deed” without further earthly
consequences. He knows that he will be king, but he also realizes that, through this act, he would be an
unpopular king. Duncan was greatly loved, ruling nobly. To kill such a beloved ruler would bring the
condemnation not only of God but of the country as well. Macbeth’s willingness to face this unpopularity
shows exactly what kind of power he desires. His definition of power is not a power to do good to others, but
only to himself. The concept of “noblesse oblige” is foreign to him. His only spur is “vaulting ambition,” an
allusion to horseback riding. This horse, this power invested in the throne, will carry him far but is also liable
to “o’erleap” itself, throwing its “rider” (Macbeth) off. Macbeth knows he will pay dearly to achieve and
maintain the throne. His decision as a hero is whether or not it is worth the price.

**Character and Theme Quotes: Essential Passage by
Character: Macbeth**

**SEYTON:**

The Queen, my lord, is dead.

**MACBETH:**

She should have died hereafter;

There would have been a time for such a word.

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day

To the last syllable of recorded time;

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Act 5, Scene 5, Lines 18-30

Summary

Macbeth is battling desperately for his throne and his kingdom. Lady Macbeth, succumbing at last to madness, has committed suicide, the stain of sin having eaten away at her mind. In a sleepwalking episode, she has effectively confessed to her and her husband’s crime. She who had been his strength and prod to seek his evil ambition is gone. Macbeth now is almost completely alone, isolated from all manner of support. He is facing a rebellion, brought on by his own tyranny.

Macbeth at this point is also still clinging to the additional prophecies of the three witches: that none born of woman shall harm him, and that he shall not be conquered until “Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him.” Neither is likely to happen, thinks Macbeth, so he is confident of victory despite the overwhelming odds. Yet his sanity is shaky in the quoted passage, and he numbly accepts the news that his wife is dead.

“She should have died hereafter,” is all he says about his wife, completely emotionless. But with her death, he feels the full weight of the world that he has brought upon himself. The passage of time drags, one day after the other until the end. His past victories and successes have done little but “light the way of fools to dusty death.” He wishes life to be over and makes the allusion that it is a mere fiction, a play, with a lot of noise and emotion, but without eternal meaning.

Analysis

The end is near for Macbeth. Although the initial prophecy of the three witches has been fulfilled (i.e., that Macbeth would be king), it was clear and straightforward, devoid of any subtle shades of meaning. The later prophecies are not so. In the manner of the Oracle of Delphi, these prophecies are vague, needing interpretation and circumspection if one intends to base actions on them. Yet Macbeth takes the prophecies at face value, and by being so literal, he has blinded himself to any other interpretation. He has wagered his kingdom on this inadequate interpretation, and he is going to lose the bet.

Guilt has now completely blinded him to reality, especially the manner in which his actions will affect that reality. He has paid all to gain the throne: not only has he murdered Duncan, he has killed the two guards, and Banquo’s wife and children, along with all the warriors whose lives will be lost in the upcoming battle. He has a heavy blood price on his hands, hands that he has not been able to wash clean.

Macbeth has even sacrificed his love for his wife. He is completely emotionless on learning of her death, saying coldly, “It were better if she had died hereafter.” Whether the meaning of this statement is that she should have waited to die later, once the outcome is sure, or whether he means that she had to die sometime, Macbeth demonstrates that he no longer is human. He is the incarnation of evil ambition.
The repetition of “tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow” gives the audience the feeling of the relentless passing of time to the diseased mind of Macbeth. Each moment is unrelenting boredom, if not agony, to him because life has become totally meaningless. Macbeth is the ultimate nihilist in this speech. He has achieved his ambition of power and discovered that it was nothing. He has sold his soul to evil and has received nothing. He has lost power, home, and family, but he feels nothing.

Shakespeare’s allusion to life as a play is a motif he uses frequently, one that makes a quick connection with the Elizabethan play-going audience of the day. In the manner of drama at the time, the extensive use of props was not used. No curtains signified the end and beginning of scenes. The simple entrance and exits of actors on stage kept the action going. Such is Macbeth’s allusion to life as a “walking shadow” and a man as a “poor player,” both in the sense that he has little respect in the larger community of the time and little control over his own actions. A man walks onto the stage of life, says his lines, then walks off and is “heard no more.” Moreover, it is not even a good play, an intriguing play, an inspiring play. It is a “tale told by an idiot.” Whether he is referring to man himself, to fate, or to God is unclear. A life may look impressive, “full of sound and fury,” but in the end it is “signifying nothing.”

Following this soliloquy, Macbeth learns the true meaning of the prophecies. Soldiers holding tree branches in front of them to hide their limited number appear to be “Great Birnam Wood” coming to “high Dunsinane Hill.” At this he finally realizes that he has misinterpreted the latter prophecies. He is prepared for defeat at the hands of Macduff, who was born by caesarian section, thus not technically “born of woman.”

Macbeth’s defeat is total, leaving a legacy behind that is “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” His pride and “vaulting ambition” have been his fatal flaws, thus leading to his tragic end. There is no remorse left in the hearts of the audience for this hero. Macbeth has won no moral victory over greater evil, as may be said in the case of Hamlet. Macbeth is the greatest villain of the play. His death does not bring any level of redemption to his life. It is one of utter and tragic defeat, without honor.
Critical Essays

Critical Essays: Sample Essay Outlines

These analytical papers are designed to review your knowledge of the drama and apply that knowledge to a critical paper. The topics may request that you examine the conflicts, themes, or question a standard theory about the play.

Topic #1
The term tragic hero refers to a central character who has a authoritative status in the drama, but through a flaw in his or her character brings about his or her demise. The flaw may consist of a poor decision that is made and creates a situation the character cannot change or control. The tragic hero recognizes his or her flaw, however there is nothing that can be done to avert tragedy. Macbeth is seen as a tragic hero. Write a paper tracing the sequence of events that contribute to Macbeth’s demise and tragic end.

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: Macbeth is seen as a tragic hero. He compromises his honor and negates moral responsibility to attain power and position which result in his tragic end.

II. Definition and characteristics of a tragic hero
   1. Fate
   2. Weakness
   3. Poor decision making resulting in a catastrophe
   4. Realization of flaw but unable to prevent tragedy

III. The Witches
   A. Plan to meet Macbeth
   B. Statement that fair is foul, and foul is fair

IV. Allegiance to Scotland and Duncan
   A. Battle with Macdonwald
   B. Battle with the King of Norway
   C. Duncan’s Response
      1. Honor bestowed on Macbeth
      2. Duncan’s opinion of Macbeth

V. Witches on the battlefield
   A. The prophecy
   B. Macbeth’s Response
   C. Banquo’s Response

VI. Macbeth’s meeting with Duncan
   A. Duncan greets Macbeth with respect
   B. Macbeth’s reaction to Duncan naming Malcolm as his successor

VII. Decisions made before Macbeth is king
   A. Lady Macbeth’s plan
      1. Macbeth’s response
      2. Lady Macbeth’s Influence on Macbeth
3. Macbeth’s decision
B. Eve of the Murder
1. Floating Dagger
2. Macbeth’s reaction
C. Duncan’s Murder
1. Murder of the guards
2. Response
D. Discovery of Duncan’s body
1. Macbeth’s reaction
2. Duncan’s sons
3. Macbeth named as king

VIII. Decisions made as King
A. Banquo
1. Fear of prophecy
2. Hires Murderers
B. Banquet
1. Reaction to Murderers
2. Ghost
C. Meeting with the Witches
1. Response to Prophecy
2. Macduff and family
3. Leaving for Dunsinane in England
D. Battle with Malcolm’s forces
1. Dunsinane prophecy
2. Young Siward
3. False sense of security
E. Reactions to Lady Macbeth’s illness and death
F. Meeting Macduff
1. Guilt
2. Revealing prophecy to Macduff
3. Macbeth’s realization that the Witches told him half-truths

IX. Macbeth’s tragic end
A. Macduff’s victory
B. Malcolm’s speech

Topic #2
Lady Macbeth is seen as a controlling factor in Macbeth’s life. She is able to control his actions and events. However, she loses control of Macbeth. Write a paper describing what control she has in Macbeth’s life and how the loss of that power contributes to her demise.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Lady Macbeth’s desire for power prompts her interest in controlling Macbeth’s actions. However, she loses control which contributes to her tragedy.

II. Introduction of Lady Macbeth
A. Reading Macbeth’s letter
B. Witches prophecy fulfilled
C. Opinion of Macbeth
D. Desire for Power
1. Strength needed
2. Her plan

III. Meeting with Macbeth
A. Affection towards each other
B. Lady Macbeth’s plan

IV. Power over Macbeth
A. Macbeth’s Decision about Lady Macbeth’s plan
   1. Lady Macbeth’s response to Macbeth
      a. Attacks his manhood
      b. Calls him a coward
      c. His fear
      d. Her anger
   2. Macbeth’s decision after they speak
      a. Agrees to the plan
      b. Recognizes her strength and vicious nature
   B. Macbeth’s vision of the daggers

V. Loss of Control over Macbeth
A. Duncan’s murder
   1. Guards
   2. Voices
   3. Fearful to return to Duncan’s chamber
B. Banquo
   1. Hires Murderers
   2. Murder of Banquo
C. Banquet
   1. Reaction to Ghost
      a. Lady Macbeth is unable to control Macbeth’s response
   2. Confession from Macbeth
   3. Guest leaving upon Lady Macbeth’s request
   4. Macbeth turns to the Witches for advice

VI. Decision’s made without Lady Macbeth’s advice
A. Banquo’s murder
B. Murder of Macduff’s family
C. Leaving for England
D. Battle with Malcolm and Macduff

VII. Lady Macbeth’s loss of control of her own life
A. Inability to kill Duncan herself
B. Taking the bloody daggers back to Duncan’s chamber after the murder
C. Realization she has no control over Macbeth’s decisions
D. Guilt Feelings

VIII. Resolution
A. Tragic end
   1. Lady Macbeth’s
   2. Macbeth’s

**Topic #3**
A motif is a word, image, or action in a drama that happens over and over again. There is a recurring motif of
blood and violence in the tragedy Macbeth. This motif contributes to the theme of the drama. In a paper trace the use of blood and violence and cite images that contribute to the theme.

**Outline**

I. Thesis Statement: The use of blood and violence occurs throughout the tragedy of Macbeth. These images contribute to the understanding of the vicious nature of Macbeth.

II. The Witches
A. On the battlefield during the battle
B. Statement to make foul things fair and fair things foul
C. Story of the sailor and his wife
D. Creating a potion
   1. Using blood in the potion
   2. Second Apparition appearing to Macbeth

III. Murders Macbeth commits
A. Duncan and his guards
   1. Inability to say amen
   2. Voices speaking to Macbeth
   3. Inability to smear blood on guards
   4. Macbeth’s description of the murder
B. Banquo
   1. Murder committed on stage
   2. Vicious nature of the crime
C. Macduff’s family
   1. Murder committed on stage
   2. Defenseless victims
D. Young Siward

IV. Lady Macbeth
A. Plot to murder Duncan
B. Bloody Daggers
   1. Returning daggers to Duncan’s chamber
   2. smearing guards with Duncan’s blood
   3. Having the blood on her hands
C. Guilt feelings
   1. Sleep walking
   2. Confession of the murders
   3. Recalling the events associated with the murders
   4. Inability to wash the guilt, the blood from her hands
   5. Her tragic end

V. Battles Macbeth is involved in
A. Duncan’s Army
   1. Macdonwald’s murder
   2. King of Norway
B. Malcolm’s forces
   1. Young Siward’s death
   2. Macbeth’s forces
C. Macduff’s Revenge
   1. Macbeth’s reluctance to battle with Macduff
2. Macbeth’s tragic end

**Topic #4**
When a comparison is made between two characters the events that happen, the situations that occur, and the characteristics of each character are shown to be similar. When a contrast is made the differences are acknowledge. Write a paper that compares and contrast the characters of Macbeth and Macduff.

**Outline**
I. Thesis Statement: The characters of Macbeth and Macduff are adversaries in the tragedy, however certain similarities can be cited. The differences and similarities contribute to Macbeth’s tragic ending and Macduff’s resolution.

II. Similarities between Macduff and Macbeth
A. Name
B. Married
C. Soldiers in Duncan’s Forces
D. Honor
   1. Macbeth’s honor at the beginning
   2. Macduff’s honor
      a. Loyalty to Scotland
      b. Loyalty to his family

III. Differences in Macduff and Macbeth
A. Duncan’s Murder
   1. Macduff’s response
   2. Macbeth’s response
B. Coronation
   1. Macbeth’s acceptance of the Crown
   2. Macduff’s disagreeing with the selection
      a. Refuses to attend coronation
      b. Leaving for England
      c. Joining Malcolm’s fight against Macbeth
C. Macbeth’s Suspicions of Macduff
D. Witches Warning
   1. Second Apparition
   2. Macbeth orders Macduff’s family to be murdered
E. Death of Wife
   1. Macduff’s reaction
      a. Shock
      b. Grief
      c. Wants to know who is responsible
      d. Vow to seek revenge
   2. Macbeth’s reaction
      a. No emotional response
      b. Does not inquire to the circumstances of her death

IV. Motive for Murder
A. Macbeth murders out of selfish greed and lust for power
B. Macduff murders to avenge the murder of his family
V. Resolution
A. Macduff returns peace to Scotland by killing Macbeth
B. Revenge is achieved
C. Restores Malcolm to the throne of Scotland

Topic #5
The Witches are seen as a force working to bring about the demise of Macbeth. They are known as the antagonist in the drama. They foreshadow events that create suspense in the drama and Macbeth makes decisions based on their prophecies. Write a paper describing how the Witches are a controlling factor in Macbeth’s destiny.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Macbeth makes decisions effecting his future based on what the Witches have told him. He guides his destiny based on their prophecies.

II. Statements made by the Witches in the opening scene
A. “When the hurlyburly’s done, When the battle’s lost and won.”
B. “Fair is foul, and foul is fair
Hover through the fog and filthy air.”

III. Exhibition of Witches’ Power
A. Prophecies
1. First battle over
2. Macbeth’s title
3. Macbeth to be made King
4. Banquo’s sons to be Kings
5. Three Apparitions prophecies
   a. Beware of Macduff
   b. No man born of woman will harm Macbeth
   c. Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill
B. Story of the Sailor
C. Hecate’s speech
D. Spell cast when potion is made

IV. Macbeth’s reaction to prophecies
A. Disbelief
B. Anxious for power
   1. Lady Macbeth’s plan
   2. Fear of retribution
   3. Decision to kill Duncan
   4. Vision of bloody dagger
C. Duncan’s Murder
   1. Guards murdered
   2. Reaction to the murder
   3. Public reaction to the murder
D. Banquo
   1. Murder of Banquo
   2. Reaction to Banquo’s ghost
   3. Confession at the banquet
E. Three Apparitions
   1. Decision to leave Scotland for England
2. Murder of Macduff’s family
3. Engage a battle with Malcolm
F. Inability to make rash decisions
   1. Murders
   2. Battles

V. Treatment of Lady Macbeth
   A. Affectionate before murder
   B. Avoidance
   C. Disinterested
   D. Lack of grief when he is told of her death

VI. Resolution
   A. Inability to make rational decisions
   B. Guilt feelings consume his mind
   C. Realization of the Witches’ prophecies being half-truths
   D. Macbeth’s death

**Criticism: Overview**

The brevity of *Macbeth* is so much a function of its brilliance that we might lose rather than gain by turning up the lost scenes of legend. This brilliance gives us in the end somewhat less than the utmost that tragedy can give. The hero, for instance, is less valuable as a person than Hamlet, Othello, or Lear; or Antony, or Coriolanus, or Timon. We may not rejoice in his fall as Dr. [Samuel] Johnson says we must, yet we have known too little about him and have found too little virtue in him to experience at his death the sense of an unutterable and tragic loss made necessary by ironies beyond our understanding. He commits murder in violation of a nature which we can assume to have been noble, but we can only assume this. Macbeth has surrendered his soul before the play begins.

When we first see him he is already invaded by those fears which are to render him vicious and which are finally to make him abominable. They will also reveal him as a great poet. But his poetry, like the poetry of the play, is to be concerned wholly with sensation and catastrophe. *Macbeth* like *Lear* is all end; the difference appearing in the speed with which doom rushes down, so that this rapidest of tragedies suggests whirlwinds rather than glaciers, and in the fact that terror rather than pity is the mode of the accompanying music. *Macbeth*, then, is not in the fullest known sense a tragedy. But we do not need to suppose that this is because important parts of it have been lost. More of it would have had to be more of the same. And the truth is that no significant scene seems to be missing. *Macbeth* is incomparably brilliant as it stands, and within its limits perfect. What it does is does with flawless force. It hurls a universe against a man, and if the universe that strikes is more impressive than the man who is stricken, great as his size and gaunt as his soul may be, there is no good reason for doubting that this is what Shakespeare intended. The triumph of *Macbeth* is the construction of a world, and nothing like it has ever been constructed in twenty-one hundred lines.

This world, which is at once without and within Macbeth, can be most easily described as strange. The world, like the witches, is always somewhere doing its work. Even in the battle which precedes the play the thane of Glamis has made "strange images of death" [I. iii. 97], and when he comes home to his lady his face is "as a book where men may read strange matters" [I. v. 62-3]. Duncan's horses after his murder turn wild in nature and devour each other—"a thing most strange and certain" [II. iv. 14]. Nothing is as it should be in such a world. "Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" [V. i. 39-40]. There is a drift of disorder in all events, and the air is murky with unwelcome miracles.
It is a dark world too, inhabited from the beginning by witches who meet on a blasted heath in thunder and lightning, and who hover through fog and filthy air as they leave on unspeakable errands. It is a world wherein "men must not walk too late" [III. vii. 7], for the night that was so pretty in Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and The Merchant of Venice has grown terrible with ill-smelling mists and the stench of blood. The time that was once a playground for free and loving spirits has closed like a trap, or yawned like a bottomless pit. The "dark hour" that Banquo borrows from the night is his last hour on an earth which has lost the distinction between sun and gloom.

Darkness does the face of earth entomb.
When living light should kiss it.
[II. iv. 9-10]

The second of these lines makes a sound that is notable in the play for its rarity: the sound of life in its normal ease and lightness. Darkness prevails because the witches, whom Banquo calls its instruments, have willed to produce it. But Macbeth is its instrument too, as well as its victim. And the weird sisters no less than he are expressions of an evil that employs them both and has roots running farther into darkness than the mind can guess.

It is furthermore a world in which nothing is certain to keep its shape. Forms shift and consistencies alter, so that what was solid may flow and what was fluid may congeal to stone.

The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,
And these are of them,
[I. iii. 79-80]

says Banquo of the vanished witches. Macbeth addresses the "sure and firm set earth" [II. i. 56], but nothing could be less firm than the whole marble and the founded rock he has fancied his life to be. At the very moment he speaks he has seen a dagger which is not there, and the "strange infirmity" he confesses at the banquet will consist of seeing things that cannot be. His first apostrophe to the witches had been to creatures

That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth,
And yet are on 't.
[I. iii. 41-2]

So now a dead man lives; Banquo's brains are out but he rises again, and "this is more strange than such a murder is" [III. iv. 81-2].

Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble.
[III. iv. 101-02]

But the shape of everything is wrong, and the nerves of Macbeth are never proof against trembling. The cardinal instance of transformation is himself. Bellona's bridegroom has been turned to jelly.

The current of change pouring forever through this universe has, as a last effect, dissolved it. And the dissolution of so much that was solid has liberated deadly fumes, has thickened the air until it suffocates all breathers. If the footing under men is less substantial than it was, the atmosphere they must push through is almost too heavy for life. It is confining, swarming, swelling; it is viscous, it is sticky; and it threatens strangulation. All of the speakers in the play conspire to create the impression that this is so. Not only do the witches in their opening scene wail "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" [I. i. 11], but the military men who enter after them anticipate in their talk of recent battle the imagery of entanglement to come:
Doubtful it stood,
As two spent swimmers that do cling together
And choke their art....
The multiplying villainies of nature
Do swarm upon him....
So from that spring whence comfort seem'd to come
Discomfort swells.
[I. ii. 7-9; 11-12; 27-8]

Macbeth's sword is reported to have "smok'd with bloody execution" [I. ii. 18], and he and Banquo were "as cannons overcharg'd with double cracks" [I. ii. 37]; they

Doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe.
[I. ii. 38]

The hyperbole is ominous, the excess is sinister. In the third scene, after what seemed corporal in the witches has melted into the wind, Ross and Angus join Banquo and Macbeth to report the praises of Macbeth that had poured in on Duncan "as thick as hail" [I. iii. 97], and to salute the new thane of Cawdor. The witches then have been right in two respects, and Macbeth says in an aside:

Two truths are told,
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme.
[I. iii. 127-29]

But the imagined act of murder swells in his mind until it is too big for its place, and his heart beats as if it were choking in its chamber.

Why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not.
[I. iii. 134-42]

Meanwhile Lady Macbeth at home is visited by no such fears. When the crisis comes she will break sooner than her husband does, but her brittleness then will mean the same thing that her melodrama means now: she is a slighter person than Macbeth, has a poorer imagination, and holds in her mind less of that power which enables it to stand up under torture. The news that Duncan is coming to her house inspires her to pray that her blood be made thick; for the theme of thickness is so far not terrible in her thought.

Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
To cry, "Hold, hold!"
[I. v. 50-4]
The blanket of the dark—it seems to her an agreeable image, and by no means suggests an element that can enwrap or smother. With Macbeth it is different: his soliloquy in the seventh scene shows him occupied with images of nets and tangles: the consequences of Duncan’s death may coil about him like an endless rope.

If it were done when’it is done, then’t were well
It were done quickly. If the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We’d jump me life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgement here, that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague the inventor.
(I. vii. 1-10)

And his voice rises to shrillness as he broods in terror upon the endless echo which such a death may make in the world.

His virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu’d against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe
Striding the blast, or heaven’s cherubin hors’d
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.
[I. vii. 18-25]

It is terror such as this that Lady Macbeth must endeavor to allay in what is after all a great mind. Her scolding cannot do so. She has commanded him to screw his courage to the sticking-point, but what is the question that haunts him when he comes from Duncan’s bloody bed, with hands that can never be washed white again?

Wherefore could not I pronounce "Amen"?
I had most need of blessing, and "Amen"
Stuck in my throat.
[II ii. 28-301]

He must not consider such things so deeply, his lady warns him. But he does, and in good time she will follow suit. That same night the Scottish earth, shaking in a convincing sympathy as the Roman earth in Julius Caesar never shook, considers the grievous state of a universe that suffocates in the breath of its own history. Lamentings are heard in the air, strange screams of death, and prophecies of dire combustion and confused events [II. iii. 56-8]. And the next morning, says Ross to an old man he meets,

By the clock ’t is day.
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp.
[II. iv. 6-7]

Macbeth is now king, but his fears "stick deep" in Banquo [III. i. 49]. The thought of one more murder that will give him perhaps the "clearness" he requires [III. i. 132] seems for a moment to free his mind from its old
obsessive horror of dusk and thickness, and he can actually invoke these conditions—in the only verse he ever uses with conscious literary intention.

Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale! Light thickens, and the crow
Makes wing to the rooky wood;
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
While night's black agents to their prey's do rouse.
[III. ii. 46-53]

The melodrama of this, and its inferiority of effect, may warn us that Macbeth is only pretending to hope. The news of Fleance's escape brings him at any rate his fit again, and he never more ceases to be "cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd" [III. iv. 23]. He is caught in the net for good, his feet have sunk into quicksands from which they cannot be freed, his bosom, like Lady Macbeth's, is "stuff'd" with "perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart" [V. iii. 44-5]—the figure varies, but the theme does not. A strange world not wholly of his own making has closed around him and rendered him motionless. His gestures are spasmodic at the end, like those of one who knows he is hopelessly engulfed. And every metaphor he uses betrays his belief that the universal congestion is past cure:

What rhubarb, senna, or what purgative drug,
Would scour these English hence?
[V. iii. 55-6]

The answer is none.

The theme never varies, however rich the range of symbols employed to suggest it. One of these symbols is of course the fear that shakes Macbeth as if he were an object not human; that makes him start when the witches call him "King hereafter," that sets his heart knocking at his ribs, that wrings from him unsafe extremities of rhetoric, that reduces him to a maniac when Banquo walks again, that spreads from him to all of Scotland until its inhabitants "float upon a wild and violent sea" of terror [IV. ii. 21], and that in the end, when he has lost the capacity to feel anything any longer, drains from him so that he almost forgets its taste [V. v. 9].

Another symbol, and one that presents itself to several of our senses at once, is blood. Never in a play has there been so much of this substance, and never has it been so sickening. "What bloody man is that?" II. ii. 1]

The second scene opens with a messenger running in to Duncan red with wounds. And blood darkens every scene thereafter. It is not bright red, nor does it run freely and wash away. Nor is it a metaphor as it was in Julius Caesar. It is so real that we see, feel, and smell it on everything. And it sticks. "This is a sorry sight," says Macbeth as he comes from Duncan's murder, staring at his hands [II. ii. 17], He had not thought there would be so much blood on them, or that it would stay there like that. Lady Macbeth is for washing the "filthy witness" off, but Macbeth knows that all great Neptune's ocean will not make him clean; rather his hand, plunged into the green, will make it all one red. The blood of the play is everywhere physical in its looks and gross in its quantity. Lady Macbeth "smears" the grooms with it, so that when they are found they seem "badg'd" and "unmannerly breech'd" with gore, and "steep'd" in the colors of their trade. The murderer who comes to report Banquo's death has blood on his face, and the "blood-bolter'd Banquo" when he appears shakes "gory locks" at Macbeth [IV. i. 123], who in deciding upon the assassination has reflected that

I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
Richard III had said a similar thing, but he suggested no veritable pool or swamp of blood as this man does; and his victims, wailing over their calamities, did not mean the concrete thing Macduff means when he cries, "Bleed, bleed, poor country!" [IV. iii. 31]. The world of the play quite literally bleeds. And Lady Macbeth, walking in her sleep, has definite stains upon the palms she rubs and rubs. "Yet here's a spot....What, will these hands ne'er be clean?...Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" [V. i. 31; 43; 50-1].

A third symbol, of greater potency than either fear or blood, is sleeplessness. Just as there are more terrors in the night than day has ever taught us, and more blood in a man than there should be, so there is less sleep in this disordered world than the minimum which once had been required for health and life. One of the final signs of that disorder is indeed the death of sleep:

Methought I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep.... Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor Shall sleep no more; Macbeth shall sleep no more."

[II. ii. 32-3; 39-40]

Nothing that Macbeth says is more terrible than this, and no dissolution suffered by his world is more ominous. For sleep in Shakespeare is ever the privilege of the good and the reward of the innocent. If it has been put to death there is no goodness left. One of the witches knows how to torture sailors by keeping sleep from their pent-house lids [I. iii. 19-20], but only Macbeth can murder sleep itself. The result in the play is an ultimate weariness. The "restless ecstasy" with which Macbeth's bed is made miserable, and

the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly

[III. ii. 18-19]

—such things are dreadful, but his final fatigue is more dreadful still, for it is the fatigue of a soul that has worn itself out with watching fears, wading in blood, and waking to the necessity of new murders for which the hand has no relish. Macbeth's hope that when Macduff is dead he can "sleep in spite of thunder" [IV. i. 86] is after all no hope. For there is no sleep in Scotland [III. vi. 34], and least of all in a man whose lids have lost the art of closing. And whose heart has lost the power of trembling like a guilty thing.

The time has been, my senses would have cool'd
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir
As life were in't I have supp'd full with horrors;
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
Cannot once start me.

[V. v. 10-15]

Terror has degenerated into tedium, and only death can follow, either for Macbeth who lacks the season of all natures or for his lady who not only walks but talks when she should sleep, and who will not die holily in her bed.

Meanwhile, however, another element has gone awry, and it is one so fundamental to man's experience that Shakespeare has given it a central position among those symbols which express the disintegration of the hero's world. Time is out of joint, inoperative, dissolved. "The time has been," says Macbeth, when he could fear;
and "the time has been" that when the brains were out a man would die, and there an end [III. iv. 77-9]. The repetition reveals that Macbeth is haunted by a sense that time has slipped its grooves; it flows wild and formless through his world, and is the deep cause of all the anomalies that terrify him. Certain of these anomalies are local or specific: the bell that rings on the night of the murder, the knocking at the gate, the flight of Macduff into England at the very moment Macbeth plans his death, and the disclosure that Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd. Many things happen too soon, so that tidings are like serpents that strike without warning. "The King comes here tonight," says a messenger, and Lady Macbeth is startled out of all composure: "Thou 'rt mad to say it!" [I. v. 31]. But other anomalies are general, and these are the worst. The words of Banquo to the witches:

> If you can look into the seeds of time,
> And say which grain will grow and which will not,
> [I. iii. 58-9]

plant early in the play a conception of time as something which fulfills itself by growing—and which, the season being wrong, can swell to monstrous shape. Or it can find crannies in the mold and extend secret, sinister roots into dark soil that never has known them. Or it can have no growth at all; it can rot and fester in its place, and die. The conception wavers, like the courage of Macbeth, but it will not away. Duncan welcomes Macbeth to Forres with the words:

> I have begun to plant thee, and will labour
> To make thee full of growing.
> [I. iv. 28-9]

But Macbeth, like time itself, will burgeon beyond bounds. "Nature's germens" will

> tumble all together,
> Even till destruction sicken.
> [IV. i. 59-60]

When Lady Macbeth, greeting her husband, says with excited assurance:

> Thy letters have transported me beyond
> This ignorant present, and I feel now
> The future in the instant,
> [I. v. 56-8]

she cannot suspect, nor can he, how sadly the relation between present and future will maintain itself. If the present is the womb or seed-bed of the future, if time is a succession of growths each one of which lives cleanly and freely after the death of the one before it, then what is to prevail will scarcely be recognizable as time. The seed will not grow; the future will not be born out of the present; the plant will not disentangle itself from its bed, but will stick there in still birth.

> Thou sure and firm set earth,
> Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
> Thy very stones prate of my whereabout,
> And take the present horror from the time,
> Which now suits with it,
> [III. i. 56-60]
prays Macbeth on the eve of Duncan's death. But time and horror will not suit so neatly through the nights to come; the present moment will look like all eternity, and horror will be smeared on every hour. Macbeth's speech when he comes back from viewing Duncan's body may have been rehearsed and is certainly delivered for effect; yet he best knows what the terms signify:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
    I had liv'd a blessed time; for, from this instant,
    There's nothing serious in mortality.
[II. ill. 91-3]

He has a premonition even now of time's disorders; of his own premature descent into the sear, the yellow leaf [V. iii. 23]; of his failure like any other man to

pay his breath
    To time and mortal custom.
[IV. i. 99-100]

"What, will the line stretch out to the crack of doom?" he cries when Banquo's eight sons appear to him in the witches' cavern [IV. i. 117]. Time makes sense no longer; its proportions are strange, its content meaningless. For Lady Macbeth in her mind's disease the minutes have ceased to march in their true file and order; her sleep-walking soliloquy [V. i] recapitulates the play, but there is no temporal design among the fragments of the past—the blood, the body of Duncan, the fears of her husband, the ghost of Banquo, the slaughter of Lady Macduff, the ringing of the bell, and again the blood—which float detached from one another in her memory. And for Macbeth time has become

a tale
    Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
    Signifying nothing.
[V. v. 26-81]

Death is dusty, and the future is a limitless desert of tomorrows. His reception of the news that Lady Macbeth has died is like nothing else of a similar sort in Shakespeare. When Northumberland was told of Hotspur's death he asked his grief to wait upon his revenge:

    For this I shall have time enough to mourn.
[2 Henry IV, I. i. 136]

And when Brutus was told of Portia's death he knew how to play the stoic:

    With meditating that she must die once,
    I have the patience to endure it now.
[Julius Caesar, IV. iii. 191-92]

But Macbeth, drugged beyond feeling, supped full with horrors, and tired of nothing so much as of coincidence in calamity, can only say in a voice devoid of tone:

    She should have died hereafter;
    There would have been a time for such a word.
[V. v. 17-18]
There would, that is, if there were such a thing as time. Then such words as "died" and "hereafter" would have their meaning. Not now, however, for time itself has died.

Duncan was everything that Macbeth is not. We saw him briefly, but the brilliance of his contrast with the thane he trusted has kept his memory beautiful throughout a play whose every other feature has been hideous. He was "meek" and "clear" [I. vii. 17-18], and his mind was incapable of suspicion. The treachery of Cawdor bewildered him:

There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face.
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust
[I. iv. 11-14]

—this at the very moment when Macbeth was being brought in for showers of praise and tears of plenteous joy! For Duncan was a free spirit and could weep, a thing impossible to his murderer's stopped heart. The word "love" was native to his tongue; he used it four times within the twenty lines of his conversation with Lady Macbeth, and its clear beauty as he spoke it was reflected that night in the diamond he sent her by Banquo [II. i. 15]. As he approached Macbeth's castle in the late afternoon the building had known its only moment of serenity and fairness. It was because Duncan could look at it and say:

This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses.
[I. vi. 1-3]

The speech itself was nimble, sweet, and gentle; and Banquo's explanation was his tone:

This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,
By his loved masonry, that the heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here; no jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle.
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observ'd
The air is delicate.
[I. vi. 3-10]

Summer, heaven, wooing, and procreation in the delicate air—such words suited the presence of a king who when later on he was found stabbed in his bed would actually offer a fair sight to guilty eyes. His blood was not like the other blood in the play, thick and fearfully discolored. It was bright and beautiful, as no one better than Macbeth could appreciate:

Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood
[II. iii. 109-10]

—the silver and the gold went with the diamond, and with Duncan's gentle senses that could smell no treachery though a whole house reeked with it. And Duncan of course could sleep. After life's fitful fever he had been laid where nothing could touch him further [III. ii. 22-6]. No terrible dreams to shake him nightly, and no fears of things lest they come stalking through the world before their time in borrowed shapes.
Our memory of this contrast, much as the doings of the middle play work to muffle it, is what gives power to Malcolm and Macduff at the end.

Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell.
[IV. iii. 22]

Scotland may seem to have become the grave of men and not their mother [IV. iii. 166]; death and danger may claim the whole of that bleeding country; but there is another country to the south where a good king works miracles with his touch. The rest of the world is what it always was; time goes on; events stretch out through space in their proper forms. Shakespeare again has enclosed his evil within a universe of good, his storm center within wide areas of peace. And from this outer world Malcolm and Macduff will return to heal Scotland of its ills. Their conversation in London before the pious Edward's palace [IV. iii] is not an interruption of the play; it is one of its essential parts, glancing forward as it does to a conclusion wherein Macduff can say, "The time is free" [V. ix. 21], and wherein Malcolm can promise that deeds of justice, "planted newly with the time," will be performed "in measure, time, and place" [V. ix. 31, 39]. Malcolm speaks the language of the play, but he has recovered its lost idiom. Blood will cease to flow, movement will recommence, fear will be forgotten, sleep will season every life, and the seeds of time will blossom in due order. The circle of safety which Shakespeare has drawn around his central horror is thinly drawn, but it is finely drawn and it holds. (pp. 252-66)


**Criticism: Evil**

*Irving Ribner*

Ⅰ

*Macbeth* is in many ways Shakespeare's maturest and most daring experiment in tragedy, for in this play he set himself to describe the operation of evil in all its manifestations: to define its very nature, to depict its seduction of man, and to show its effect upon all of the planes of creation once it has been unleashed by one man's sinful moral choice. It is this final aspect which here receives Shakespeare's primary attention and which conditions the sombre mood of the play. Shakespeare anatomizes evil both in intellectual and emotional terms, using all of the devices of poetry, and most notably the images of blood and darkness which so many commentators have described. For his final end of reconciliation, he relied not upon audience identification with his hero, but rather upon an intellectual perception of the total play. In this lay his most original departure.

*Macbeth* is a closely knit, unified construction, every element of which is designed to support an intellectual statement, to which action, character, and poetry all contribute. The idea which governs the play is primarily explicit in the action of the central character, Macbeth himself; his role is cast into a symbolic pattern which is a reflection of Shakespeare's view of evil's operation in the world. The other characters serve dramatic functions designed to set off the particular intellectual problems implicit in the action of the central figure. The basic pattern of the play is a simple one, for which Shakespeare returned to an earlier formula he had used in *Richard III*. The hero accepts evil in the third scene of the play. In the second act he commits the deed to which his choice of evil must inevitably lead him, and for the final three acts, as he rises higher in worldly power he sinks deeper and deeper into evil, until at the end of the play he is utterly and finally destroyed.

There is here no pattern of redemption or regeneration for the fallen hero as in *King Lear*. Shakespeare's final statement, however, is not one of despair, for out of the play comes a feeling of reconciliation which does affirm the kind of meaning in the world with which great tragedy must end. In the earlier tragedies this feeling had been created largely through the regeneration of an essentially sympathetic hero. In *Macbeth*, however,
there can be little doubt of the final damnation of "this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen" [V. ix. 35]. The audience is made to see, however, that Macbeth is destroyed by counterforces which he himself sets in motion. We may thus, viewing the play in its totality, see good, through divine grace, inevitably emerging from evil and triumphant at the play's end with a promise of rebirth. (pp. 147-48)

The action of Macbeth falls into two distinct parts, each carefully shaped as part of the greater whole. There is first a choice of evil by the hero, in which Shakespeare defines the nature of evil and explains the process by which man is led to choose it. This occupies roughly the first two acts, although Shakespeare by recurrent image and symbol keeps these dominant ideas before his audience throughout the rest of the play. The last three acts exhibit the manner of evil's operation simultaneously on four levels: that of fallen man himself, that of the family, the state, and the physical universe. As evil operates on each of these planes, however, it generates at the same time forces of good, until at the end of the play we see evil destroyed on each of the four planes of creation and the harmonious order of God restored. The play is an ordered and controlled exploration of evil, in which Shakespeare fulfills the function of the philosophical poet as surely as did Dante in the Divine Comedy.

II

It has been pointed out that Othello and Lear in their falls parallel the fall of Adam, and like Adam they are able to learn in their disasters the nature of evil and thus attain a kind of victory in defeat. The destruction of Macbeth, on the contrary, is cast in the pattern of the fall of Satan himself, and the play is full of analogies between Satan and Macbeth. Like Satan, Macbeth is from the first entirely aware of the evil he embraces, and like Satan he can never renounce his free-willed moral choice, once it has been made. It is thus appropriate that the force of evil in Macbeth be symbolized by Satan's own sin of ambition. This sin for Shakespeare, as it had been for Aquinas, was an aspect of pride, the worst of the medieval seven deadly sins. In the neatly ordered and harmonious universe of which Renaissance man conceived, it stood for a rebellion against the will of God and thus against the order of nature.... Macbeth, through love of self, sets his own will against that of God, chooses a lesser finite good—kingship and power—rather than a greater infinite one. Shakespeare in Macbeth's moral choice is offering a definition of evil in fairly traditional terms.

The ambitious man will strive to rise higher on the great chain of being than the place which God has ordained for him. To do so he must break the bond which ties him on the one hand to God and on the other to humanity. Immediately before the murder of Banquo, Macbeth utters lines which often have been misinterpreted by commentators:

Come seeling night,  
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day;  
And with thy bloody and invisible hand  
Cancel and tear to pieces the great bond  
Which keeps me pale!  
[III. ii. 46-50]

The "great bond" has usually been glossed either as the prophecy of the witches or as Banquo's lease on life, neither of which is very meaningful within the context of the passage. The bond … can only refer to the link which ties Macbeth to humanity and enjoins him to obey the natural law of God. Macbeth is calling upon the Satanic forces of darkness to break this bond of nature and thus enable him again to defy the laws of man and God, to murder his friend and guest. (pp. 148-50)

Macbeth's sin, like that of Satan before him, is thus a deliberate repudiation of nature, a defiance of God. All of the natural forces which mitigate against the deed are evoked by Macbeth himself:
He's here in double trust,
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife himself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off.
[I. vii. 12-20]

His realization of the unnaturalness of the act he contemplates is in his reply to his wife's reflection on his courage:

I dare do all that may become a man,
Who dares do more is none.
[I. vii. 46-7]

It is Macbeth's knowing and deliberate denial of God and his rejection of the law of nature which set him apart from the heroes of Hamlet, Othello and Lear. His voluntary choice of evil, moreover, closes the way of redemption to him, for in denying nature he cuts off the source of redemption, and he must end in total destruction and despair. He is like [Christopher] Marlowe's Faustus in this. Once he has given his "eternal jewel" to the "common enemy of man," he must abide by the contract he has made. (p. 150)

III.
The characters of Macbeth are not shaped primarily to conform to a psychological verisimilitude, but to make explicit the intellectual statements with which the play is concerned. They have choral and symbolic functions. The illusion of reality with which Shakespeare endows them serves merely to embody their symbolic functions in specific emotional terms. Successful as the illusion may be, Lady Macbeth, Banquo, and the witches are not whole figures about whom we can ask such questions as [A. C.] Bradley asked [in his Shakespearean Tragedy], and could only answer by divorcing them from the context of the play. All that we need know about the witches is that they are, as [John] Dover Wilson has well put it in the Cambridge edition of Macbeth, "the incarnation of evil in the universe, all the more effective dramatically that their nature is never defined." They are no more than convenient dramatic symbols for evil. To question closely the motives of Banquo or Lady Macbeth, with their many and obvious inconsistencies, is equally fruitless, for they function primarily as dramatic vehicles whose action is governed by the demands not of fact or psychology, but of intellectual design.

As symbols of evil, the witches are made contrary to nature. They are women with the beards of men; their incantation is a Black Mass, and the hell broth they stir consists of the disunified parts of men and animals, creation in chaos. They deliberately wait for Macbeth and Banquo, as they wait for all men. They do not, however, suggest evil to man . . . for the impulse to evil must come from within man himself. They simply suggest an object which may incite the inclination to evil which is always within man because of original sin, and they do this by means of prophecy. Thus the good man, like Banquo, can resist their appeal, for man shares in the grace of God as well as in original sin.

The witches hold forth the promise of worldly good, as all evil must, for if it were not attractive it would offer no temptation to man. What Shakespeare wishes to stress is that its promises are false ones, that seeming truths are half truths, and that, in general, evil works through deception, by posing as the friend of man. Thus Eve had been seduced by Satan, and thus Othello had been seduced by "Honest" Iago. Banquo recognizes the Satanic origin of the witches: "What, can the devil speak true?" [I. iii. 107], and he perceives the manner in
which they work:

And oftentimes, to win us to our harm.
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.
[II. iii. 123-26]

To make this statement about the deceptive nature of evil, Shakespeare works into the texture of his play the theme of appearance versus reality which so many critics have noticed. There is always confusion and uncertainty in the appearance of evil, darkness rather than light, never the clear, rational certainty which is in the natural order of the good. This theme is in Macbeth's opening remark: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" [I. iii. 38]. "There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face" [I. iv. 11-12] says Duncan, and Lady Macbeth cautions her husband to "look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't" [I. v. 65-6]. Macbeth himself acknowledges that "False face must hide what the false heart doth know" [I. vii. 82].

Not until the very end of the play does Macbeth learn how evil works. It offers to him, it seems, the finite good, kingship and power, which his perverted will causes him to place above the infinite good of God's order; thus evil becomes his good. He relies upon this promise, trusting the prophecy of the witches to the very last, and thus unknowingly bringing about his own destruction and the restitution of natural order. Only when Birnam wood has in fact come to Dunsinane and he faces a foe not born of woman, does the deception in the witches' promises become apparent to him:

And be these juggling fiends no more believed,
That palter with us in a double sense;
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope.
[V. viii. 19-22]

Banquo, as [Leo] Kirchbaum has indicated, stands opposed to Macbeth as a kind of morality figure [see excerpt in section on Banquo]. The witches offer him temptation not unlike what they offer Macbeth, and Banquo is sorely tempted, as any man must be. This is best revealed in a short speech which both for Bradley and [G.] Wilson Knight [in his Shakespearean Tragedy] was evidence that Banquo too had been corrupted by evil:

yet it was said
It should not stand in thy posterity,
But that myself should be the root and father
Of many kings. If there come truth from them—
As upon thee, Macbeth, their speeches shine—
Why, by the verities on thee made good,
May they not be my oracles as well,
And set me up in hope? But hush! no more.
[III. i. 3-10]

The difference between the two men is that Banquo is able to resist the temptation to which Macbeth succumbs. Banquo is an ordinary man, with his mixture of good and evil, open to evil's soliciting, but able to resist it. It is in such a man, Shakespeare is saying, that the hope for the future lies. This hope is embodied in Fleance, and thus, in terms of the play's total conceptual pattern, it is impossible for Macbeth to kill him. Evil can never destroy the ultimate promise of good.
Banquo, humanly weak and subject to temptation, stands nevertheless, "in the great hand of God" [III. iii. 130]. Symbolically he represents one aspect of Macbeth, the side of ordinary humanity which Macbeth must destroy within himself before he can give his soul entirely to the forces of darkness. For this reason he must murder Banquo, and it is why the dead Banquo returns to him as a reminder that, as a man, he cannot easily extinguish the human force within himself, that the torment of fear, the "terrible dreams / that shake us nightly" [III. ii. 18-19], the scorpions in his mind [III. ii. 36], will continue until his own final destruction. Banquo and his ghost are used to illuminate the basic conflict within the mind of Macbeth.

Macduff and Malcolm serve similar symbolic functions. Macduff, in particular, is a force of nemesis generated by Macbeth's own course of evil. Malcolm … is Shakespeare's portrait of the ideal king, and his function chiefly is to represent a restitution of order in the state. (pp. 151-53)

Just as Banquo symbolizes that side of Macbeth which would accept nature and reject evil, Lady Macbeth stands for the contrary side. Her function is to second Macbeth in the moral choice which is his alone, to mitigate against those forces within him which are in opposition to evil. Macbeth is thus much in the position of the traditional morality play hero placed between good and evil angels.

The side of his wife seduces him, and that of Banquo must be destroyed.

It is for this reason, as has so often been pointed out, that the imagery of her speeches draws upon corruptions of nature and reversal of the normal life impulses. She calls upon the forces of darkness to support her in her purposes:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Come you spirits} \\
\text{That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,} \\
\text{And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull} \\
\text{Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood;} \\
\text{Stop up the access and passage to remorse,} \\
\text{That no compunctious visiting of nature} \\
\text{Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between} \\
\text{The effect and it! Come to my women's breasts,} \\
\text{And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,} \\
\text{Wherever in your sightless substances} \\
\text{You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,} \\
\text{And pall me in the dunnest smoke of hell,} \\
\text{That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,} \\
\text{Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,} \\
\text{To cry 'Hold, hold.'} \\
\end{align*}
\]

[I. v. 40-54]

It is fitting that Shakespeare should use a woman for this purpose, for woman is the normal symbol of life and nourishment, and thus the dramatist can emphasize the strangeness and unnaturalness of the very contraries to which Lady Macbeth appeals and for which she stands. She must become unsexed, and her milk must convert to gall. Her very need, moreover, to put aside her feminine nature informs the illusion of reality in her characterization and gives to her emotional appeal as well as intellectual meaning.

The motif of the unnatural is evoked again in her savage cry:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I have given suck, and know} \\
\text{How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:} \\
\text{I would, while it was smiling in my face,}
\end{align*}
\]
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums
And dash'd the brains out.
[I. vii. 54-8]

We cannot say whether she actually has children or not, for this speech is not designed to convey fact. It is a ritual statement in which Shakespeare seizes upon a strikingly unnatural image to emphasize that she is urging Macbeth on the basis of all which is opposed to nature and the order of God. If Shakespeare, later in the play, in Macduff's "He has no children" [IV. iii. 216] seems to indicate that Macbeth is childless, it is not that he has forgotten the earlier speech. There he wishes merely to emphasize the intensity of Macduff’s feeling in the same ritual manner.

Throughout the play Lady Macbeth's femininity is held in constant juxtaposition to the unnatural forces she would call into play. In the murder scene her unnatural aspect is dominant, but her femininity comes through in her inability to kill the king herself. When the body is discovered, she is the first to collapse. This careful juxtaposition of contraries comes to a head when she walks in her sleep in the fifth act. Here the images of blood are mingled with her feminine desire for the "perfumes of Arabia" to "sweeten this little hand" [V. i. 51]. No more than Macbeth can lightly break his bond with humanity, can his wife escape the woman in her which mitigates against the unnatural force of evil which in the thematic structure of the play she represents. In her death by suicide, moreover, there is further emphasis upon the theme which dominates the play; that evil inevitably must breed its own destruction. (pp. 153-54)

IV.
The specific act of evil occurs on two planes, that of the state and that of Macbeth's "single state of man" [I. iii. 140]; the crime is both ethical and political, for Macbeth murders not only his kinsman and guest, but his king as well. Once evil is unleashed, however, it corrupts all of the planes of creation, not only those of man and the state, but those of the family and the physical universe as well. Action, character, symbolic ritual and the powerful emotional impact of poetic imagery all combine to further a specific intellectual concept: the all-embracing destructive force of evil which touches every area of God's creation.

That the physical universe itself is thrown out of harmony is made clear in the speech of Lennox immediately following the murder:

The night has been unruly: where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down: and, as they say,
Lamentings heard i’ the air: strange screams of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confused events
New hatched to the woeful time: the obscure bird
Clamour’d the livelong night: some say, the earth
Was feverous and did shake.
[II. iii. 54-61]

This theme is even more strongly emphasized in a short scene in which Ross speaks to a nameless old man. The strange phenomena here described are all perversions of physical nature which indicate that one man's crime has thrown the entire universe out of harmony:

Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man's act.
Threaten his bloody stage: by the clock 'tis day,
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp:
Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame,
That darkness does the face of earth entomb.
When Living light should kiss it?
[II. iv. 5-10]

The order of nature is reversed, the sun blotted out. On the animal level, a falcon is killed by a mousing owl, and most horrible of all:

Duncan's horses—a thing most strange and certain—
Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race.
Turn'd wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,
Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would make
War against mankind.
[II. iv. 14-18]

Man by his sin has forfeited his dominion over nature: horses turn against their natural master, and, as the old man affirms, "they eat each other" [II. iv. 18].

This perversion of nature, however, contains within itself the means of restoring harmony, for Shakespeare uses the very perversion itself, a moving forest and a child unborn of mother to herald the downfall of the tyrant and thus to restore the physical universe to its natural state of perfection. That the forest does not really move, and that Macduff was only technically so born is of no significance, for Shakespeare is giving us here not scientific fact, but dramatic symbol to emphasize the theme of the play that in the working out of evil is implicit a rebirth of good.

On the level of the state Macbeth unleashes the greatest evils of which Shakespeare's audience could conceive, tyranny, civil war, and an invading foreign army. The tyranny of Macbeth's reign, moreover, is set off by the initial description of the gentility and justice of Duncan's previous rule. Shakespeare here deliberately alters his source, for Holinshed had stressed Duncan's feeble and slothful administration, and he had, by way of contrast, praised Macbeth for his striving after justice and for the excellence of at least the first ten years of his reign.

The disorder in the state as it works out its course is also the source of its own extinction and the restoration of political harmony. The very tyranny of Macbeth arouses Macduff against him, causes Malcolm to assert the justice of his title, and causes the saint-like English King, Edward the Confessor, to take arms against Macbeth. King Edward's curing of the scrofula [IV. iii. 146-49], an episode which Dover Wilson, like so many other critics, has regarded as "of slight dramatic relevance," is Shakespeare's means of underscoring that Edward is an instrument of supernatural grace, designed to cleanse the unnatural evil in the state, just as he may remove evil from individual man. It is Macbeth's very tyranny which has made him "ripe for shaking, and the powers above / Put on their instruments" [IV. iii. 238-39].

On the level of the family, the relationship between Macbeth and his wife steadily deteriorates. At the beginning of the play their relationship is one of the closest and most intimate in all literature. She is "my dearest partner in greatness" [I. v. 11], and much as it harrows him himself to think of its implications, he sends her immediate word of the witches' prophecy, so that she may not "lose the dues of rejoicing" [I. v. 12]. The very terror of the murder scene only further emphasizes the closeness of the murderers. But as the force of evil severs Macbeth from the rest of humanity, it breaks also the bond which ties him to his wife. He lives more and more closely with his own fears into which she cannot intrude, as the banquet scene well illustrates. She cannot see the ghost which torments her husband.

The gradual separation of man and wife first becomes apparent just before the murder of Banquo. No longer does he confide in her. At the play's beginning they plan the future together; at the end each dies alone, and when the news of her death comes to Macbeth, he shows little concern:
She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word
[V. v. 17-18]

This theme of family disintegration is echoed, moreover, in Macduff's desertion of his wife and children to be
destroyed by the tyrant whom the father flees.

It is upon the disintegration of Macbeth himself, however, that Shakespeare lavishes his principal attention.
He is careful to paint his hero in the opening scenes as a man of great stature, the savior of his country, full of
the "milk of human kindness" [I. v. 17], with an infinite potentiality for good. He has natural feelings which
link him to his fellow men and make him view with revulsion the crime to which ambition prompts him. Once
the crime is committed, however, these feelings are gradually destroyed, until at the end of the play he is a
symbol of unnatural man, cut off from his fellow men and from God. As his link with humanity weakens,
moreover, so also does his desire to live, until finally he sinks into a total despair, the medieval sin of acedia
[apathy], which is the surest evidence of his damnation.

Macbeth's extraordinary powers of imagination have been amply commented upon. Imagination itself,
however, cannot be viewed as a cause of man's destruction within any meaningful moral system. Shakespeare
endows Macbeth with this ability to see all of the implications of his act in their most frightening forms, even
before the act itself is committed, as an indication of Macbeth's initial strong moral feelings. Bradley wisely
recognized the "principle of morality which takes place in his imaginative fears." Imagination enables
Macbeth emotionally to grasp the moral implications of his crime, to participate imaginatively, as does the
audience, in the full horror of the deed. Macbeth is entirely aware of God's moral system with its
"even-handed justice," which "commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice / To our own lips" [I. vii.
10-12]. His great soliloquy in contemplation of Duncan's murder [I. vii. 1-28] is designed to underscore
Macbeth's initial feelings of kinship with the natural order.

As he prepares to commit the act he dreads, he calls for the suppression of these feelings within him. In a kind
of devilish incantation he calls for darkness and the extinction of nature, conjuring the earth itself to look
aside while he violates the harmonious order of which he and it are closely related parts:

Now o'er the one half world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep, witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's offerings, and wither'd murder,
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace.
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,
And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it.
[II. i. 49-60]

The figure of the wolf is an appropriate one, for here Macbeth allies himself with the destroyer of the innocent
lamb, symbolic of God, just as he allies himself with the ravisher Tarquin, the destroyer of chastity, symbolic
in the Renaissance of the perfection of God.

That Macbeth cannot say "amen" immediately after the murder is the first clear sign of his alienation from
God. He will sleep no more, for sleep is an aspect of divine mercy. Steadily Macbeth moves farther and
farther from God and his fellow men, and his bond with nature is weakened. He becomes committed entirely
to an unnatural course from which he cannot retreat:

For mine own good,
All causes shall give way: I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
[III. iv. 134-37]

He has become the center of his own little alien world, for which "all causes shall give way." Now Macbeth is
ready to seek the witches out, a commitment to evil as total as that of Marlowe's Faustus in his summoning of
Mephistopheles. And the words of the weird sisters lead him to the most horrible excess of all, the wanton
murder of the family of Macduff. At the beginning of the play, evil had come to Macbeth unsought, as it does
to all men; he had followed its promptings in order to attain definite ends, and not without strong misgivings.
Now he seeks evil himself; he embraces it willingly and without fear, for no other end than the evil act itself.

The divided mind and the fear felt by the early Macbeth were not weakness; they were ... signs of his kinship
with man and God. But, by the fifth act:

I have almost forgot the taste of fears:
The time has been, my senses would have cool'd
To hear a night-shriek; and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir
As life were in't: I have supped full with horrors;
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
Cannot once start me.
[V. v. 9-15]

With the loss of human fear, Macbeth must forfeit also those human attributes which make life livable: "that
which should accompany old age, / As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends" [V. iii. 24-5]. There is
nothing left for him but the utter despair of his "Tomorrow and tomorrow" speech [V. v. 19-28]. Even with
this unwillingness to live, which is in itself a denial of the mercy of God (as the medieval mind conceived of
acedia), Shakespeare will not allow Macbeth the heroic gesture of suicide which he grants to Brutus [in Julius
Caesar] and Othello. Macbeth will not "play the Roman fool" [V. viii. 1]. His spiritual destruction must be
reflected in an ignominious physical destruction, and thus the play ends with the gruesome spectacle of the
murderer's head held aloft in triumph. (pp. 155-59)

If we are to isolate a dominant theme in the play, it must be one of idea: that through the working out of evil
in a harmonious world order good must emerge. This idea is embodied in specific action and specific
character, and thus by imaginative exploration the dramatist is able to illuminate it more fully than any prose
statement ever could. Great tragedy involves a tension between emotion and intellect. The horrors of the
action move our emotions as the play progresses, but when the last curtain has fallen and we can reflect upon
Macbeth in its totality, we see that although one man has been damned, there is an order and meaning in the
universe, that good may be reborn out of evil. We may thus experience that feeling of reconciliation which is
the ultimate test of tragedy. (p. 159)

1959, pp. 147-59.

J. Lyndon Shanley
Nowhere can we see the essential humanity of Shakespeare more clearly than in Macbeth, as he shows that
the darkest evil may well be human, and so, though horrible, understandable in terms of our own lives and therefore pitiable and terrible. Yet nowhere apparently are we so likely to miss the center of Shakespeare's view of the action; for *Macbeth*, while less complex than Shakespeare's other major tragedies, frequently raises the crucial question: Is Macbeth's fall really tragic?

Many who are deeply moved by the action of the play cannot satisfactorily explain their feelings. The doctrine of *Tout comprendre, c'est tout par-donner* ("if all is understood then all is pardoned") leads them to think (most of the time) that there is no guilt, that there should be no punishment. When faced with unpardonable evil and inescapable punishment for the guilty, and when moved at the same time to pity and fear by the suffering of the evil-doer, they are confused. Since they confound the understanding of an act with the excusing of it, they are prevented from understanding acts (and their reactions to them) for which excuse is impossible. Some, of course, find an excuse for Macbeth in the witches. But those who do not see him as the victim of agents of destiny appear to wonder if they have not been tricked into sympathy by Shakespeare's art. How, they ask, in view of Macbeth's monstrous career and sorry end, so different from those of Hamlet, Lear, or Othello, how can his fortunes win our pity and arouse our fear?

I

Macbeth is defeated as is no other of Shakespeare's great tragic figures. No pity and reverent awe attend his death. Dying off-stage, he is, as it were, shuffled off, in keeping with his dreadful state and the desire of all in his world to be rid of him. The sight of his "cursed head" is the signal for glad hailing of Malcolm as king; all thought of him is dismissed with "this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen" [V. ix. 35]. The phrase is dramatically fitting, but it does not express the whole truth that Shakespeare shows us of Macbeth's story. Seldom do we feel so strongly both the justice of the judgment and the retribution and at the same time pity for him on whom they fall; for behind this last scene lies the revelation of Macbeth's almost total destruction.

Hamlet, Lear, and Othello lose much that is wonderful in human life; their fortunes are sad and terrible. So near, their stories seem to say, is man's enjoyment of the world's best gifts—and yet so far, because his own errors and weakness leave him unable to control his world. To lose Hamlet's delight in man and his powers, and the glory of life; to have Cordelia's love and tender care snatched away, after such suffering as Lear's; or to have thrown away the jewel of one's life as did Othello—this is painful. But their fortunes might have been worse. At one time they were: when the losers thought that what they had served and believed in were mere shows that made a mockery of their noblest love; when life and all their efforts seemed to have been utterly without meaning.

But before the end they learned that their love had value and that life had meaning. On this knowledge depends the two-fold effect of the heroes' deaths: death at once seals, without hope of restitution, the loss of the world and its gifts, but at the same time it brings relief from the pain of loss. Furthermore, this knowledge restores the courage and nobility of soul that raise them far above their enemies and the ruins of their world. Without this knowledge, Hamlet and Lear and Othello were far less than themselves, and life but a fevered madness. With it, there is tragedy but not defeat, for the value of what is best in them is confirmed beyond question.

But in the end of *Macbeth* we have something fundamentally different. Macbeth's spirit, as well as his world, is all but destroyed; no great recovery is possible for him. He does not, for he cannot, see that what he sought and valued most was good and worthy of his efforts. He is aware that he has missed much; shortly before Lady Macbeth dies, he broods over the "honour, love, obedience, troops of friends" [V. iii. 25] he has lost and cannot hope to regain. But this knowledge wins no ease for his heart. It does not raise him above the conditions that have ruined him. Macbeth, it is true, is no longer tortured as he once was, but freedom from torture has led only to the peace of despair in which he looks at life and denounces it as "a tale told by an idiot" [V. v. 26-7].
Bitter as life was for Hamlet, Lear, and Othello, it was not empty. But all Macbeth's efforts, all his hopes and dreams were in vain, because of the way he went; and when he discovers that they were, he concludes that nothing can be realized in life. Hence his terrible indictment of life—terrible because it reveals him to be all but hopelessly lost in the world of Shakespearean tragedy, as he desperately and ironically blasphemes against a basic tenet of that world, to the truth of which his own state bears overwhelming evidence: that man's life signifies everything.

It is the despair and irony in this blasphemy that makes Macbeth's lot so awful and pitiful. We see the paralyzing, the almost complete destruction of a human spirit. The threat of hostile action galvanizes Macbeth into action to protect himself, but the action is little more than an instinctive move toward self-preservation and the last gesture of despair. "At least," he cries, "we'll die with harness on our back" [V. v. 51]. There is no sense of effective power and will to give life meaning, such as there is in [Gerard Manley] Hopkins' lines:

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;  
Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man  
In me or, most weary, cry I can no more, lean;  
Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.  
[Carriion Comfort]

Here the speaker knows despair for what it is, and knows that something else is both possible and worth any effort. But not so Macbeth; he can see only the circumstances from which his despair arises; he can imagine no condition of life other than that he is in.

He has not even the bitter satisfaction of rebelling and saying, "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods" [King Lear, IV. i. 36]. Only sheer animal courage remains to flash out and remind us of a Macbeth once courageous in an honorable cause. This reminder is pitiful, for Macbeth has not even the slim hope of a trapped animal which, if it fights loose, has something to escape to. All Macbeth did resulted in nothing; whatever he does now will result in nothing but the anguish of meaningless action. It is hard enough to realize that one has been on the wrong track for part of life; to be convinced that there is no right track to get on because there is no place for any track to go—this is to be lost with no hope at all.

At the very end we see some saving touches of humanity in Macbeth: he has not lost all human virtue; he would have no more of Macduff's blood on his soul; and even with the collapse of his last security, his bravery does not falter. These touches show him a man still, and not a fiend, but they by no means re-establish him in his former self. There is no greatness in death for him. Rather than the human spirit's capacity for greatness in adversity, we see its possible ruin in evil. Because we never see Macbeth enjoying the possession of the great prize he sought, and because from the beginning of his temptation we have no hope that he will be able to enjoy it, his loss of the world's gifts is not so poignant as that of Hamlet, Lear, or Othello. But to a degree that none of them does, Macbeth loses himself, and this is most tragic of all.

II

It may be objected, however, that Macbeth alone of Shakespeare's great tragic figures is fully aware of the evil of the act by which he sets in motion the train of events leading to his ruin. His culpability seriously weakens the sympathy of many. In the face of this difficulty, some interpreters justify sympathy for Macbeth by seeing him as the victim of the witches, the agents of destiny. This point of view, however, seems to cut through the complex knot of human life as Shakespeare saw it, instead of following the various strands which make it up. We cannot dodge Macbeth's responsibility and guilt—he never does.

His ruin is caused by the fact that he sins: he willfully commits an act which he knows to be wrong. This ruin and sin are seen to be tragic, as Shakespeare, like Dante, reveals the pity and fear in a man's succumbing to grievous temptation, and in the effects of sin on his subsequent thoughts and deeds. Macbeth's guilt and the
circumstances upon which it depends do not decrease our pity and fear; they produce it; for Shakespeare presents Macbeth as one who had hardly any chance to escape guilt.

The concatenation of circumstances which make Macbeth's temptation is such as to seem a trap. At the very moment when he is returning victorious from a battle in which he has played a chief part in saving his country from disaster, there comes to him a suggestion—touching old dreams and desires—that he may be king. Shakespeare uses the witches to convey the danger of the suggestion. The witches and their prophecies are poetic symbols of the bafflingly indeterminate character of the events that surround men. The witches force nothing; they advise nothing; they simply present facts. But they confound fair and foul; just so, events may be good or ill. The witches will not stay to explain their greetings any more than events will interpret themselves. The witches' prophecies and the events that forever surround men are dangerous because they may appear simple and are not, because they may be so alluring as to stultify prudence, and because their true significance may be very hard to come at. Depending on conditions, they may be harmless, or they may be delusive, insidious, and all but impossible to read correctly.

Macbeth is in no condition to read them aright. He had restrained his desire for greatness in the past since he would not do the wrong which was needed to win greatness. The hunger of his ambitious mind had not died, however; it had only been denied satisfaction. Now, when the sense of his own power and his taste of it are high indeed, the old hunger is more than re-awakened; it is nourished with hope, as immediate events seem to establish the soundness of the suggestion. Enough hope to lead him to ponder the suggestion seriously, and then, in spite of an attempt to put it out of his mind since he recognizes the evil of his thoughts, to retail the wonderful news of possible greatness to his wife.

There follow immediately two events which press the matter on most hastily. The king proclaims his eldest son as his heir, and in the next breath announces his visit to Macbeth's castle. Thus, while desire and hope are fresh, Macbeth sees put before him, first, an obstacle which time will only make greater, and then an opportunity for him to prevent time from working against him. "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly" [I. vii. 1-2]. In fact, it must be done quickly if it is to be done at all.

Desire, apparent promise of fulfillment, need for speedy action, and immediate opportunity fall together so rapidly as to create an all but inescapable force.

Yet Macbeth would have resisted temptation had he been left to himself. Great though his hunger for power and glory, especially when whetted by such circumstances, it would not have completely overcome his fears and scruples. Even if he were to jump the life to come, he knew that if he could and would kill Duncan, another might well do the same for him. On a higher plane, the double loyalty he owed to the king held him back. Finally, a point that reveals the virtue that was in him, he felt the goodness of Duncan so strongly that killing him seemed too terrible a thing to do. Worldly prudence, loyalty, reverence for what is good—these turned Macbeth back. Lady Macbeth's fears were well founded; his nature was not such as to let him "catch the nearest way."

But that nature could, as she felt, be worked. It was good, but not firm in its goodness. Macbeth is a moderately good man, no better, but also no worse, than the next one. The point is (and it is a grim one) that the virtue of the ordinarily good man is not enough to keep him from disaster under all possible circumstances—especially when some of them are such as may be for good or evil.

This was the nature of Lady Macbeth's influence on Macbeth. She could sway him because she understood him and loved him, and because he loved her and depended on her love and good thoughts of him. She could and would have urged him to noble deeds had occasion arisen. To prevent her from urging him on to evil ones, he needed more than the ordinary firmness to act as he saw right. But to cut clear of such a source of strength and comfort is difficult; too difficult for Macbeth. It is the old story of the perversion of the
potentially good, and of the problem of getting only the good from the baffling mixture of good and evil in all things.

Just after Macbeth has decided to give up his murderous plot, but before intention can harden to resolve, Lady Macbeth adds the force of her appeals to that of Macbeth's desires and the press of circumstance. She sees his chance to win the prize of life; she knows he wants it, as she does not know in their full strength his reasons for renouncing it. She beats down, at least long enough for her immediate purpose, the fears and scruples which would otherwise have kept him from the crown, and murder and ruin. She does not answer Macbeth's scruples; her attack is personal. Whether she knows or simply feels his need of her admiration and support, she strikes at the right point. The spur of ambition did not drive Macbeth too hard toward his great opportunity, but her goading taunts he could not withstand, though they drove him on to horrors.

All this does not excuse Macbeth; no excuse is possible for one who, with full knowledge of the nature of the act, murders a good man to whom he owes hospitality, loyalty, and gratitude. Shakespeare makes us realize, however, how dangerous the battle, how practically irresistible may be the forces arrayed against a man. Some men are saved from evil because they marry a Cordelia or a Viola (in Twelfth Night); others because opportunity never favors their desires; and still others because the stakes do not justify the risk of being caught in evil-doing. For Macbeth, the stakes are the highest, the opportunity golden, and the encouragement to evil from a wife whom he loves and needs.

Macbeth is terrified by the warnings of his conscience, but he cannot surrender. That he acts with full knowledge of the evil only increases the pity and fear aroused by his deed. For this knowledge causes much of his suffering; it makes his condition far worse than it would have been had he acted with less-than-complete knowledge; and, finally, it emphasizes the power of the trickery, the lure, and the urging to which he was subjected. We pity his suffering even as he does evil because we understand why he could not hold on to the chance which he ought to have taken to save himself; and we are moved to fear when we see his suffering and understand how slight may be the chance to escape it.

III

Once that chance is lost, greater suffering and evil follow inescapably. The bloody career on which Macbeth now embarks can no more be excused than could his first crime, but it increases rather than detracts from our pity and fear. The trap of temptation having been sprung, there is no escape for Macbeth, and his struggles to escape the consequences of his sin serve only to ensnare him more deeply. As we witness that struggle, our pity and fear increase because we feel how incompetent he is to do anything but struggle as he does.

Evil brings its own suffering with it, but Macbeth cannot learn from it. The unknown fifteenth-century author of The Book of the Poor in Spirit wrote of evil and suffering: "One's own proper suffering comes from one's own sins and he suffers quite rightly who lives in sins, and each sin fosters a special spiritual suffering....This kind of suffering is similar to the suffering in hell, for the more one suffers there the worse one becomes. This happens to sinners; the more they suffer through sin the more wicked they become and they fall more and more into sufferings in their effort to escape." Just so did Shakespeare conceive of Macbeth's state.

Macbeth has no enemy he can see, such as Iago or one of Lear's savage daughters; he is within himself. In first overriding the warnings of his conscience, he brings on the blindness which makes it impossible for him to perceive his own state and things outside him as they really are, and which therefore sends him in pursuit of a wholly illusory safety. When he puts away all thought of going back on his first evil deed, he deals the last blow to his conscience which once urged him to the right, and he blinds himself entirely.

No sooner does he gain what he wanted than he is beset by fears worse than those he overrode in murdering Duncan. But having overridden the proper fears, he cannot deal rightly with the new ones. His horror of murder is lost in the fear of discovery and revenge, and the fear of losing what he has sacrificed so much to
gain. Briefly at least he wishes the murder undone and Duncan waking to the knocking at the gate. But just as earlier he thought, but failed, to put the witches' prophecies and his evil thoughts out of mind, so now his better thoughts die. By the time he appears in answer to the knocking at the gate, he is firmly set on a course to make good the murder of Duncan and to keep himself safe.

All is terrible irony from this point on. With a new decisiveness Macbeth kills the grooms in Duncan's chamber; alive, they were potential witnesses; dead, they can serve as plausible criminals. Then he plays brilliantly the part of a grief-stricken host and loyal subject:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had liv'd a blessed time; for from this instant
There's nothing serious in mortality;
All is but toys; renown and grace is dead;
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of.
[II. 111. 91-6]

Irony could not be sharper. At the very moment when he seems to himself to be complete master of the situation, Macbeth, all unknowingly, utters the bitter truth about his state. He is still to be troubled by thoughts of evil, but the drive of his desire for peace from fear is greater; and to win security he is hurrying on the way in which he thinks it lies, but it is the way to the utter, empty loneliness he describes for us here.

Macbeth finds that the death of the grooms was not enough; Banquo and Fleance must go if he is to be free from torment. Through Macbeth's conversation first with Banquo about his journey, then with the murderers, and finally with Lady Macbeth, we comprehend to its full extent the disastrous change in him; he now contemplates murder with hope rather than horror. He still sees it as something to be hidden: "Come, seeling night, scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day" [III. ii. 46-7]. But he is willing to do more evil since he believes it will ensure his safety: "Things bad begun make good themselves by ill" [III. ii. 55]. With the appearance of Banquo's ghost comes the last flicker of conscience, but also an increasing terror of discovery and revenge which drives Macbeth further than ever: "For mine own good all causes shall give way" [III. iv. 134-35].

The only thing he can gain in his blinded state is the very worst for him. He now seeks out the witches to get that reassurance in his course which he cannot find in himself. Although they will not stay for all his questions, he unhesitatingly accepts their equivocations; since they do reassure him, his doubts of them are gone. With their answers, and having lost "the initiate fear that wants hard use" and being no longer "young in deed" [III. iv. 142-43]. Macbeth enjoys the sense of security of any gangster or tyrant who has the unshrinking will to crush any possible opponents, and who thinks he has power to do so with impunity. All that he has gained, however, is the freedom to commit "every sin that has a name to it" [IV. iii. 59-60].

His delusion is complete; his ruin inevitable. Not until he experiences the bitter fruition of his earthly crown does he discover what has happened to him. Even then, however, he sees only in part; the blindness he suffered when he succumbed to temptation was never to be lightened; and hence the final irony of

a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.
[V. v. 26-8]

In [Nathaniel Hawthorne's] The Scarlet Letter when Hester Prynne seeks mercy for Dimmesdale from Roger Chillingworth, the old physician replies: "It is not granted me to pardon. I have no such power as thou tellest me of. My old faith, long forgotten, comes back to me, and explains all that we do, and all we suffer. By thy
first step awry thou didst plant the germ of evil; but since that moment, it has all been a dark necessity." So we feel, in part, about Macbeth, since we see him, not as a victim of destiny, but as one responsible for the misery and deaths of others as well as for his own suffering. But in spite of his responsibility we cannot withhold our sympathy from him.

The action of Macbeth evokes a somber "there but for the grace of God." We understand but we do not therefore pardon all. Rather we acknowledge the evil and the guilt and so acquiesce in the inevitable retribution, but at the same time we are deeply moved by Macbeth's suffering and ruin because we are acutely aware of the dangerous forces before which he falls, and because we recognize their power over one like ourselves—a moderately good man who succumbs to temptation and who, having succumbed, is led to more evil to make good the first misstep, until there is no chance of withdrawal or escape. As we watch him, we know that he should not have fallen; he might have resisted; but Shakespeare's vision here is of a world in which men can hardly do better amid the forces of circumstance; and in which, if men do no better, they must suffer, and lose not only the world but themselves as well. Of such suffering and loss is tragedy made. (pp. 305-11)


**Criticism: Supernatural Elements**

That the Weird Sisters possess ... perennial and astounding vitality is attested by the whole sweep of Shakespearean criticism. All hands seem to be convinced that they symbolize or represent evil in its most malignant form, though there is to be found little unanimity of opinion regarding the precise nature of that evil, whether it is subjective or objective or both, whether mental or metaphysical. (pp. 55-6)

The single purpose of this study is to examine, as thoroughly as possible, the nature of that evil which the Weird Sisters are said to symbolize or represent, and to reproduce one aspect at least of the metaphysical groundwork of the drama. It presupposes that in Shakespeare's time evil was considered to be both subjective and, so far as the human mind is concerned, a non-subjective reality; that is to say, evil manifested itself subjectively in the spirits of men and objectively in a metaphysical world whose existence depended in no degree upon the activities of the human mind. This objective realm of evil was not governed by mere vague and irrational forces; it was peopled and controlled by the malignant wills of intelligences—evil spirits, devils, demons, Satan—who had the ability to project their power into the workings of nature and to influence the human spirit. Such a system of evil was raised to the dignity of a science and a theology. (p. 58)

Since ... this belief was so universal at the time, we may reasonably suppose that Shakespeare's Weird Sisters are intended to symbolize or represent the metaphysical world of evil spirits. Whether one considers them as human witches in league with the powers of darkness, or as actual demons in the form of witches, or as merely inanimate symbols, the power which they wield or represent or symbolize is ultimately demonic. Let us, therefore, exercise wisdom in the contemplation of the nature, power, and illusions of unclean spirits.

In the meantime, we may conveniently assume that in essence the Weird Sisters are demons or devils in the form of witches. At least their control over the primary elements of nature ... would seem to indicate as much. Why, then, should Shakespeare have chosen to present upon his stage these witch-likenesses rather than devils in devil-forms? Two equally valid reasons may be suggested. In the first place, the rather sublime devil and his angels of the earlier drama, opponents of God in the cosmic order and destroyers of men, had degenerated in the hands of later dramatists into mere comic figures; by Shakespeare's time folk conception had apparently so dominated dramatic practice and tradition that cloven hoof, horns, and tail became associated in the popular imagination only with the ludicrous.... In the second place, witches had acquired no such comic associations.
They were essentially tragic beings who, for the sake of certain abnormal powers, had sold themselves to the devil. As we have seen, everybody believed in them as channels through which the malignity of evil spirits might be visited upon human beings. Here, then, were terrifying figures, created by a contemporary public at the most intense moment of witchcraft delusion, which Shakespeare found ready to his hand. Accordingly he appropriately employed witch-figures as dramatic symbols, but the Weird Sisters are in reality demons, actual representatives of the world of darkness opposed to good. (pp. 59-61)

[The] Weird Sisters take on a dignity, a dark grandeur, and a terror-inspiring aspect which is in no way native to the witch-symbol as such. In the first place, they are clairvoyant in the sense that whatever happens outwardly among men is immediately known to them. In the thunder and lightning of a desert place they look upon the distant battle, in which Macbeth overcomes the King's enemies, and conjecture that it will be lost and won before the day ends. They do not travel to the camp near Forres where Duncan receives news of the battle, but when Macbeth is created Thane of Cawdor they seem to know it instantly. They must be aware that it is Macbeth who murders Duncan, because Hecate berates them for having trafficked with him in affairs of death without her help. All the events of the drama—the murder of Banquo and the escape of Fieance, the striking down of Lady Macduff and her children, Macbeth's accumulating sins and tragic death—must, as they unfold in time, be immediately perceived by these creatures in whom the species of these things are connatural. Moreover, by virtue of their spiritual substance they are acquainted with the causes of things, and, through the application of wisdom gained by long experience, are able to prognosticate future events in relation to Macbeth and Banquo: Macbeth shall be king, none of woman born shall harm him, he shall never be overcome until Birnam wood shall come against him to Dunsinane; Banquo shall be no king, but he shall beget kings. The external causes upon which these predictions are based may to a certain extent be manipulated by these demonic forces: but the internal causes, i.e., the forces which move the will of Macbeth to action, are imperfectly known and only indirectly subject to their influence. They cannot read his inmost thoughts—only God can do that—but from observation of facial expression and other bodily manifestations, they surmise with comparative accuracy what passions drive him and what dark desires of his await their fostering. Realizing that he desires the kingdom, they prophesy that he shall be king, thus arousing his passions and inflaming his imagination to the extent that nothing is but what is not. This influence gained over him is later augmented when they cause to appear before him evil spirits, who condense the air about them into the shapes of an armed Head, a bloody Child, and a crowned Child. These demonic presences materialize to the sound of thunder and seem to speak to him with human voices, suggesting evil and urging him toward destruction with the pronouncement of half-truths. These are illusions created by demonic powers, objective appearances with a sensible content sufficient to arouse his ocular and auditory senses.

Indeed, the Weird Sisters are always illusions when they appear as such upon the stage; that is to say, their forms clothe the demonic powers which inform them. This is suggested by the facility with which they manifest to human sight and disappear. King James suspects that the Devil is able to render witches invisible when he pleases, but these Weird Sisters seem of their own motion to melt into thin air and vanish like a dream. Instead of disappearing with the swift movement which characterizes demonic transportation of bodies, they simply fade into nothingness. This suggests that their movements from place to place are not continuous necessarily. Though one of them plans to sail to Aleppo in a sieve, we feel that for the most part they appear in one place at one instant and at another place the next instant, or at whatever time pleases them, without being subject to the laws of time and place. I would not, however, force this point. At any rate, all their really important actions in the drama suggest that they are demons in the guise of witches.

But the witch-appearances constitute only a comparatively small part of the demonic manifestations in Macbeth. Many of the natural occurrences and all of the supernatural phenomena may be attributed to the activities of the metaphysical world of evil spirits. Whether visible or invisible these malignant substances insinuate themselves into the essence of the natural world and hover about the souls of men and women; they influence and in a measure direct human thought and action by means of illusions, hallucinations, and inward persuasion. For example, since they are able to manipulate nature's germens and control the winds, we may
reasonably suppose that the storm which rages over Macbeth's castle and environs in Act II is no ordinary
tempest caused by the regular movements of the heavenly bodies, but rather a manifestation of demonic
power over the elements of nature. Indeed, natural forces seem to be partly in abeyance; o'er the one
half-world nature seems dead. A strange, mephitic atmosphere hangs over and pervades the castle and
adjacent countryside; an unnatural darkness, for ages the milieu of evil forces, blots out the stars and in the
morning strangles the rising sun. Where Lennox lies—evidently not far distant—the night is so unruly that
chimneys are blown down, lamentings and strange screams of death are heard in the air; and the firm-set earth
is so sensitized by the all-pervading demonic energy that it is feverous and shakes. Macbeth senses this
magnetization, and fears that the very stones will prate of his whereabouts. As the drunken Porter feels,
Macbeth's castle is literally the mouth of hell through which evil spirits emerge in this darkness to cause
upheavals in nature. Within the span of his seventy years the Old Man has experienced many strange and
dreadful things, but they are as trifles in comparison with the occurrences of this rough night. Demonic
powers are rampant in nature. (pp. 77-81)

Macbeth's vision of a dagger is an hallucination caused immediately, indeed, by disturbed bodily humours and
spirits but ultimately by demonic powers, who have so controlled and manipulated these bodily forces as to
produce the effect they desire. And a like explanation may be offered of the mysterious voice which Macbeth
seems to hear after the murder, crying exultantly to all the house, "Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder
sleep" [II. ii. 32-3]. (p. 84)

Banquo's ghost is an infernal illusion, created out of air by demonic forces and presented to Macbeth's sight at
the banquet in order that the murderer may be confused and utterly confounded. The second appearance of
Banquo's ghost, together with the show of eight kings [IV. i. 112], is undoubtedly the result of demonic
machinations. Having persuaded and otherwise incited Macbeth to sin and crime, the Devil and his angels
now employ illusions which lead to his betrayal and final destruction.

And finally, certain aspects of Lady Macbeth's experience indicate that she is possessed of demons. At least,
in preparation for the coming of Duncan under her battlements, she calls upon precisely those metaphysical
forces which have seemed to crown Macbeth. The murdering ministers whom she invokes for aid are
described as being sightless substances, *i.e.*, not evil thoughts and "grim imaginings" but objective substantial
forms, invisible bad angels, to whose activities may be attributed all the unnatural occurrences of nature.
Whatever in the phenomenal world becomes beautiful in the exercise of its normal function is to them foul,
and *vice versa*; they wait upon nature's mischief. She recognizes that they infest the filthy atmosphere of this
world and the blackness of the lower regions; therefore she welcomes a night palled in the dunnest smoke of
hell, so dense that not even heaven may pierce the blanket of the dark and behold her projected deed. Her
prayer is apparently answered; with the coming of night her castle is, as we have seen, shrouded in just such a
blackness as she desires. (pp. 85-6)

What happens to Lady Macbeth in the course of Act IV is not immediately clear. Apparently there is a steady
deterioration of her demon-possessed body until, at the beginning of Act V, the organs of her spirit are
impaired to the point of imminent dissolution. Such a great perturbation of nature has seized upon her that she
walks night after night in slumbery agitation, with eyes wide open but with the senses shut. There appears a
definite cleavage in her personality. Her will, which in conscious moments guards against any revelation of
her guilty experiences, is submerged; and her infected mind is forced to discharge its secrets in the presence of
alien ears. Her symptoms in these circumstances resemble those of the ordinary somnambulist, but the
violence of her reactions indicates that her state is what may be called "somnambuliform possession" or
"demoniacal somnambulism." ... The most outstanding characteristic of this demoniacal somnambulism,
which in the course of history has been more common than any other form of possession, is that the normal
individuality disappears and seems to be replaced by a second personality, which speaks through the patient's
mouth. This strange individuality always confesses wrong-doing, and sometimes relates a sort of life-history
consisting frequently of the patient's reminiscences or memories. Now the physician to Lady Macbeth
recognizes these symptoms in his patient. Sometimes, to be sure, he has known those who have walked in
t heir sleep who have died holily in their beds. But this disease is beyond his practice; this heart sorely charged
with perilous stuff needs the divine more than the physician. The demonic substances she welcomed into her
body now employ her bodily functions to disclose her criminal experiences. (pp. 89-90)

Shakespeare's age would undoubtedly have pronounced Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking an instance of
demonical somnambulism. Practically everybody, so far as may be determined, accepted demonic possession
as an established fact. The New Testament affirmed it; the Church Fathers had elaborated and illustrated it;
the Catholic Church made of it a firm article of faith and proceeded to exorcise demons by means of
recognized rituals involving holy water and cross, bell, book, and candle; and Protestants could not
consistently deny it, or if some of them did, peremptory experience forced them to take a doubtful refuge in
the conception of obsession, which produced the effects of possession.... Fortunately Shakespeare has spared
us, in the case of Lady Macbeth, a representation of the more disgusting physical symptoms of the
diabolically possessed, such as astounding contortions of the body and fantastic creations of the delirious
mind. He merely suggests these horrors in the report of the Doctor that the Lady is troubled with thick-coming
fancies and in the expressed opinion of some that she took her own life by self and violent hands. He is
interested primarily in presenting not so much the physical as the spiritual disintegration of this soul-weary
creature possessed of devils.

In this manner, it seems to me, Shakespeare has informed Macbeth with the Christian conception of a
metaphysical world of objective evil. The whole drama is saturated with the malignant presences of demonic
forces; they animate nature and ensnare human souls by means of diabolical persuasion, by hallucination,
inefonal illusion, and possession. They are, in the strictest sense, one element in that Fate which God in his
providence has ordained to rule over the bodies and, it is possible, over the spirits of men. And the essence of
this whole metaphysical world of evil intelligences is distilled by Shakespeare's imagination and concentrated
in those marvellous dramatic symbols, the Weird Sisters. (pp. 91-3)

Walter Clyde Curry, "The Demonic Metaphysics of Macbeth," in his Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns,
Louisiana State University Press, 1937, pp. 53-93.

**Criticism: Time**

**Tom F. Driver**

In Macbeth there are three kinds of time: (1) time measured by clock, calendar, and the movement of sun,
moon, and stars, which for the sake of convenience we may call "chronological time;" (2) an order of time
which overarches the action of the entire play and which may be called "providential time;" and (3) a time
scheme, or an understanding of time, belonging to Macbeth, which maybe called "Macbeth's time." (pp.
143-44)

The play contains a very large number of references to chronological time; that is, to the day, the night, or the
hour. There is no point in citing all of them, but one example may serve to show the deliberateness with which
the hour is sometimes established. Act I, Scene vii, in which the resolution to commit the murder of Duncan is
made firm, takes place at supper time.

The next scene (II. i) must establish that the hour has come for all to be retired, a matter accomplished in four
lines:

Banquo:
How goest the night, boy?
Fleance:
The moon is down; I have not heard the clock.

Banquo:
And she goes down at twelve.

Fleance:
I take 't, 'tis later, sir.

Banquo:
Hold, take my sword. There's husbandry in heaven: Their candles are all out.

[II. 1. 1-5]
(p. 145)

In addition to such specific references to time (of which there are many) the play contains a very great number
of lines which give merely a sense of time, inducing in the spectator a kind of temporal anxiety. For instance,
there is such a large number of speeches employing the words "when," "yet," and "until" that the effect is
striking. As an example, the opening lines of the play:

1 Witch:
When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

2 Witch:
When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

[I. i. 1-4]

Throughout the play, adverbs of time are important because the Weird Sisters, at the beginning, put the future
into our minds. In Scene iv, Macbeth, having learned that two of the prophecies are true, talks with himself
about the third:

Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother'd in surmise....

[I. iii. 137-41]

At the end of the scene he invites Banquo to speak with him "at more time" regarding what has transpired, and
arouses our expectations with the concluding phrase, "Till then, enough" [I. iii. 153, 156]. (p. 146)

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare, as usual, is careful in his "imitation" of chronological time. He is not slavish to
detail, but he strives for an effect in which the feeling of being in a real world of time is extremely important.
Shakespeare's adroit compression of time, his use of a fast and slow scheme of double-time, his concrete
references to passing time, and the temporal note diffused throughout the speeches, all locate the audience in a
temporal world and prepare it to accept time as a meaningful reality upon which rests much of the imaginative
structure of the play.

Connected with chronological time in *Macbeth*, but not equated with it, is providential time, which is to say,
time as an expression of social and universal righteousness. (p. 148)
How does Shakespeare communicate the idea of a providential time? In the first place, he assumes an objective, temporal order, distinguished on the one hand from mere chronology and on the other hand from anyone's subjectivity. Early in the play, Duncan sets the order of historical succession:

Sons, kinsmen, thanes,
And you whose places are the nearest, know
We will establish our estate upon
Our eldest Malcolm, whom we name hereafter
The Prince of Cumberland; which honor must
Not unaccompanied invest him only.
But signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine
On all deservers.
[I. iv. 35-42]

Here is the proper relationship of past and future, the historical succession guaranteeing order a passage through the present into what comes "hereafter." To such historical order, Macbeth is immediately thrown into opposition:

Macbeth:
(Aside) The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies.
[I. iv. 48-50]

The prophecies of the Weird Sisters also contribute to an idea of objective time. They provide a sense of destiny, or an order in future events already set. The objectivity of the time they represent would, of course, evaporate if it were admitted that the Weird Sisters are primarily a symbol of Macbeth's imagination. That they are not. They appear to the audience before they are seen by Macbeth, so that the spectator naturally takes them to have an existence apart from Macbeth. The sisters therefore stand for a knowledge of the future, and the accuracy of their knowledge is confirmed in the unfolding events of the play. After seeing them, the audience harbors a conception of what is supposed to happen, which it continually plays off against what it sees taking place.

The Weird Sisters' first speeches to Macbeth [I. iii] imply a fulfillment of time. "Glamis," "Cawdor," and "King" are not only names designating rank in the Scottish hierarchy, they are also, in this case, expressions of past, present, and future; Macbeth has been thane of Glamis, he this day becomes thane of Cawdor, and he shall "be King hereafter" [I. iii. 50]. (pp. 149-51)

In Macbeth's second meeting with the weird sisters the temporal note is struck yet more distinctly. Macbeth is given assurance of victory until a certain event ("until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him"—[IV. i. 92-4]). Although he does not know it, the moment of his defeat is set. It is noteworthy that he is not given a certain number of days, but rather he is vouchsafed power until certain things shall come to pass. He is actually given a lease which will expire very shortly, while he confidently interprets it to be "the lease of nature" [IV. i. 99]. In this scene also there is a return to the theme of historical continuity. The time which the Weird Sisters proclaim is partner to the time which Duncan had represented in establishing the historical succession upon his son. The show of eight kings, which is set before Macbeth upon his own insistence to know the future of Banquo's line, implies a continuation of the historical succession through Banquo's descendants as far as the mind can reach:

What, will the line stretch out to th' crack of doom?
Another yet! A seventh! I'll see no more.
And yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass
Which shows me many more.
[IV. i. 117-20]

This vision of the ordering of the future, bringing the constituted authority in a straight line to Shakespeare's new monarch, James I, and on to the rim of time, is a step which Macbeth cannot o'erleap. It is a "horrible sight" [IV. i. 122] and because of it Macbeth damns the time in which he stands: "Let this pernicious hour / Stand aye accursed in the calendar!" [IV. i. 133-34].

It is possible to see the full reality of providential time only when Macbeth's time is thrown into relief against it. More than one critic has noticed that a change takes place in Macbeth's understanding and experience of time. (pp. 151-52)

Macbeth opposes a more ultimate time than his own. He would "let the frame of things disjoint" [III. ii. 16]; he would "jump the life to come" [I. vii. 7]; he murders sleep, that daily symbol of man's finitude in time; he destroys the meaning of tomorrow and tomorrow, the ironic consequence of his attempt to control the future.

In his attempt to gain control over the future ... , Macbeth reveals that his experience of time is compounded of memory and anticipation. In order to gain control of the future, to o'erleap the steps which lie in his way, he must create memories. Memories, the past haunting the present as guilt, reduce Lady Macbeth to her pitiful end. Her "What's done is done" of Act III [III. ii. 12] later becomes, "What's done cannot be undone" [V. i. 68]. It is as a bulwark against memories that Macbeth erects his doctrine of the meaninglessness of life.

Much as he would like, Macbeth cannot separate the present from the past and the future. By the act of murder he has made his own history, and the rest of the play is the account of the fulfillment of that history, ultimately self-defeating. His sin (skillfully portrayed by Shakespeare as a combination of will and temptation) blinds him to the meaning of providential time, while it does not remove him from subordination to it, nor does it remove him from his own inner historical experience. He therefore continues ... to make use of biblical images of history and human finitude, although entirely without the biblical awareness of grace. The petty pace creeps in "To the last syllable of recorded time" [V. v. 21], a phrase which not only recalls Macbeth's earlier vision of the line which stretches out "to the crack of doom" [IV. i. 117], but which also reflects biblical eschatology. This picture of the mortality of time is followed by that of man's mortality, sketched in four images: the brief candle, the walking shadow, the strutting and fretting upon the stage, and the tale which is told, each of which has biblical parallels. Even in his final despair, therefore, Macbeth is made to speak of an order of time which he has not been able to destroy, although that had been his hope when he and his Lady stood in what proved to be a completely decisive moment upon the "bank and shoal of time" [I. vii. 6]. (pp. 153-54)


Stephen Spender
I do not know whether any Shakespearean critic has ever pointed out the significant part played by ideas of time in Macbeth.

One often hears quoted:

Come what may
Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.
[I. iii. 146-47]
Actually the tragedy of Macbeth is his discovery that this is untrue.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are ... haunted ... by the sense of time. After she has received his letter describing the meeting with the witches, Lady Macbeth's first words to her husband are:

> Thy letters have transported me beyond  
The ignorant present, and I feel now  
The future in the instant.  
[I. v. 56-8]

Their trouble is though that the future does not exist in the instant. There is another very unpleasant instant preceding it which has to be acted on—the murder of Duncan.

In the minds of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth there are, after the prophetic meeting with the Weird Sisters, three kinds of time: the time before the murder, the time of the murder of Duncan, and the enjoyable time afterwards when they reap the fruits of the murder. Their problem is to keep these three times separate and not to allow them to affect each other. If they can prevent their minds showing the sense of the future before the murder, and of the past, after it, they will have achieved happiness. As soon as the murder has been decided on, Lady Macbeth scents the danger:

> Your face, my thane, is as a book where men  
May read strange matters: to beguile the time,  
Look like the time.  
[I. v. 62-4]

How little Macbeth succeeds in this, we gather from his soliloquy before the murder:

> If it were done—when 'tis done—then 'twere well  
If it were done quickly: if the assassination  
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch  
With his surcease, success: that but this blow  
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,  
But here upon this bank and shoal of time,  
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases  
We still have judgement here; that we but teach  
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return  
To plague th' inventor.  
[I. vii. 1-10]

Macbeth certainly has good reason to fear "even-handed justice" [I. vii. 10]. But, I think, the second part of this speech is only a rationalization of his real fear, as unconvincing in its way as Hamlet's reasons against self-murder. The real fear is far more terrible: it is a fear of the extension into infinity of the instant in which he commits the murder. "The bank and shoal of time" is time that has stood still; beyond it lies the abyss of a timeless moment.

He loses his nerve, but Lady Macbeth rallies him:

> When you durst do it, then you were a man;  
And, to be more than what you were you would  
Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place  
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Does unmake you.
[I. vii. 49-541]

She forces his mind upon the conjunction of time and place which may never occur again. They never do, indeed, recur. The murder of Banquo is ill-timed, Malcolm escapes, everything is botched, and Macbeth swears that after this he will carry out those crimes which are the "firstlings of his heart" [IV. i. 147].

The soliloquy in which Macbeth sees the dagger before him is the first of his hallucinations. Yet the delusion is not complete. He is able to dismiss it from his mind, and he does so by fixing down the time and place, in order to restore his mind to sanity:

There's no such thing:
It is the bloody season which informs
Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one half world
Nature seems dead.
[II. i. 47-50]

He reminds himself of the exact tune of night, and this calms him. He invokes the hour, and he invokes the place, with a reason: to relegate this moment preceding the murder to the past from which it cannot ever escape into a future. As some people say, "I will remember this moment for the rest of my life," Macbeth tries to say, "I will uproot this moment from my memory."

Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabout,
And take the present horror from the time
Which now suits with it.
[III. i. 56-60]

He is more afraid of the associations of the stones than any evidence they may actually reveal to living witnesses.

Immediately after the murder we are left in no doubt that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have failed in their main purpose of killing in memory the moment of the murder itself.

Macbeth tells his wife how he could not say "Amen" to the prayer of the man in his sleep. "Amen" is the conclusion of prayer, which is inconcludable. "Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep'" [II. ii. 32-3].

There is no "Amen" nor night of sleep which will ever end that moment which opens wider and wider as the play proceeds. Macbeth's speech in the next scene is a naïf deception, which happens also to be the truth wrung from his heart:

Had I but [died] an hour before this chance,
I had lived a blessed time.
[II. iii. 91-2]

With this he tries to fob off his followers. Meanwhile, one is left in some doubt as to Lady Macbeth's state of mind. The Sleepwalking scene is a shocking revelation which shows that the moment when she smeared the faces of the grooms has died no more for her than has the murder for Macbeth. "Here's the smell of blood
still" [V. i. 50]. The ailment of indestructible time is revealed by Macbeth to the doctor:

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased;  
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow;  
Raze out the written troubles of the brain;  
And with some sweet oblivious antidote  
Cleanse the stuff: bosom of the perilous stuff  
Which weighs upon the heart?  
[V. iii. 40-5]

Thus, after the murder the past comes to life again and asserts itself amid the general disintegration. An old man appears on the stage to compare the horrors of the past with the monstrosities of the present. Ross says:

By the clock 'tis day.  
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp.  
[II. iv. 6-7]

The present disgorges the past. The horror of not being able to live down his deeds is symbolized by the appearance of Banquo's ghost. Macbeth looks back on a time when the past was really past and the present present:

The time has been  
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,  
And there an end.  
[III. iv. 77-9]

There is no end within the control of Macbeth. In the fourth act, we even have a feeling that everything has stopped. The play seems to spread out, burning up and destroying a wider and wider area, without moving forward.

"Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow" [V. v. 19-28] is not merely the speech of a disillusioned tyrant destroyed by the horror which he has himself created; it has a profound irony, coining from Macbeth's mouth, because he of all people ought to have been able to make tomorrow different from today and yesterday. But all his violence has done is to create a deathly sameness.

This view of Macbeth struck me as I was reading it recently. The only doubt in my mind was whether the last speech in the play would bear out my theory that it was time which, even more than in Hamlet, had got out of joint in Macbeth. This is what Malcolm says to the lords who have rebelled against the tyrant:

We shall not spend a large expense of time  
Before we reckon with your several loves  
And make us even with you.... What's more to do,  
Which would be planted newly with the time ...  
We will perform in measure, time, and place.  
[V. ix. 26-39]

The emphasis of Malcolm is on time and measure and place, which he is restoring.

Macbeth is naturally the play of Shakespeare's to which we are most likely to turn if we look for parallels with the present. It is impossible to read the lines beginning "Our country sinks beneath the yoke; It weeps, it bleeds" [IV. iii. 38-9], without thinking of half a dozen countries under the yoke of a tyrant. It is impossible
not to wonder whether modern tyrants are haunted by their Banquos, and surrounded by a sense of gloomy waking nightmare. But the instruments of justice are weaker than in Shakespeare's time; the consciences of men, brought up on an inverted philosophy of materialism, are not so tender, or so superstitious perhaps. The loss of the sense of time and measure and place, the past rising in solemn visions and portents in the midst of the present, the sense of endless waiting and of time standing still in the midst of the most violent happenings; these provide deeper parallels.

In his book *Pain, Time and Sex*, Gerald Heard claims that man has reached a stage in his evolution in which he has to take a great and decisive step forward which would involve revising not only his social institutions but also his whole conception of the meaning of life. A tyranny, a murder, and a great decision at the end, are the plot of *Macbeth*. The chaos of time, the sense of being haunted by past examples, is connected not only with the tyrann, but also with the decision. The strange scene between Malcolm and Macduff in which Malcolm recites all the vices of past kings and declares that he embodies them; and then contradicts himself and stands forth in his virginity; this is a ranking of all the forces of evil against the forces of the good; and the decision is for the good.

But Malcolm is a restorer, not a revolutionary or an innovator. He takes it for granted that the strange confusion of time that has opened out in *Macbeth* is wrong. It is here that the parallel of our own day with Shakespeare fades. It is even possible that in a sense the stage which we have reached is an advance on Shakespeare. We are living in an age of chaos and confusion, but we cannot go back, we have to go forward. It may be then that the very disorder may show us the way out of our confusion. Our loss of the sense of the continuity of time may give us an entirely new idea of time within which it will be possible to establish a new kind of order. We cannot dismiss the dreams and hallucinations of art in our time as a sign of decadence and of an end. They may be an end; on the other hand, they may be the beginning of something. We only know that we do not exist to restore a past, but to create a future which embodies the greatness of the past. (pp. 120-26)


**Criticism: Gender and Sex Roles**

One of the organizing themes of *Macbeth* is the theme of manliness: the word (with its cognates) echoes and re-echoes through the scenes, and the play is unique for the persistence and subtlety with which Shakespeare dramatizes the paradoxes of self-conscious "manhood." In recoiling from Macbeth's outrageous kind of manliness, we are prompted to reconsider what we really mean when we use the word in praising someone. Macbeth's career may be described in terms of a terrible progressive disjunction between the manly and the humane. In any civilized culture—even among the Samurai, Macbeth's counterparts in feudal Japan—it would be assumed that the first set of values is complementary to and subsumed in the second. But, as he so often does, Shakespeare exposes with memorable clarity the dangers of such a comfortable assumption: the more Macbeth is driven to pursue what he and Lady Macbeth call manliness—the more he perverts that code into a rationale for reflexive aggression—the less humane he becomes, until at last he forfeits nearly all claims on the race itself, and his vaunted manhood, as he finally realizes, becomes meaningless.

After the play begins with the three witches promising a general season of inversion—"Fair is foul, and foul is fair" [1.1l]—in I.i, the human action commences with the arrival of a wounded sergeant at Duncan's camp: "What bloody man is that?" [I. ii. 1] The sergeant's gore, of course, is emblematic of his valor and hardihood and authorizes his praise of Macbeth himself, "valor's minion"—and it also betokens his vulnerable humanity, his mortal consanguinity with the King and the rest of his nation, which he like Macbeth is loyally risking to preserve. These are traditional usages, of course, and they are invoked here at the beginning as norms which Macbeth will subsequently disjoin from each other and pervert.
That process of disjunction begins in Scene v when Lady Macbeth contemplates her husband's heretofore humane character against what the coming-on of time might bring:

It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily—wouldst not play false
And yet wouldst wrongly win.
[I. v. 17-22]

Greatness must be divorced from goodness, highness of estate from holiness, "the nearest way" from "human kindness"—with, as usual, a serious Shakespearian play on kindness: charity, and fellowship in the race. And then, carrying the process to its logical end, Lady Macbeth ritually prepares herself for the deed her husband must commit by calling on the spirits of murder first to divest her of all vestiges of womanliness—"unsex me here" [I. v. 41]—with the implication that she will be left with male virtues only; and then to nullify her "kindness" itself: "Make thick my blood, / Stop up the access and passage to remorse, / That no compunctious visitings of nature / Shake my fell purpose" [I. v. 43-6].

In his great agonized soliloquy while Duncan is at dinner, the object of this dire rehearsal sternly reminds himself that he owes the King a "double trust," as subject to his monarch, and, on the basis of kindness again, simply as host to his guest. He then clinches the argument by conjuring up that strange image of "pity, like a naked newborn babe / Striding the blast" [I. vii. 21-2]—strange indeed for the battle hero, so recently ruthless in his king's behalf, to embrace this vision of an ultimate object of human pity. The sexless naked babe is the antithesis of himself, of course, as the manly military cynosure: and Macbeth's failure to identify with his own cautionary emblem is foretold, perhaps, in the incongruously strenuous postures of the babe: "striding the blast," "horsed / Upon the sightless couriers of the air" [I. vii. 22-3].

At any rate, Lady Macbeth enters and makes short work of her husband's virtuous resolution. The curious thing about her exhortation is that its rhetorical force is almost wholly negative. Dwelling hardly at all on the desirability of Duncan's throne, she instead cunningly premises her arguments on doubts about Macbeth's manly virtue. All of his previous military conquests and honors in the service of Duncan will be meaningless unless he now seizes the chance to crown that career by killing the king. And, striking more ruthlessly at him, she scornfully implies that his very sexuality will be called into question in her eyes if he refuses the regicide—"From this time / Such I account thy love" [I. vii. 38-9]. When Macbeth sullenly retorts, "I dare do all that may become a man, / Who dares do more is none" [I. vii. 46-7], he gives Lady Macbeth the cue she needs to begin the radical transvaluation of his code of manliness that will lead to his ruin. As Robert Heilman has observed about this and other plays [in "Manliness in the Tragedies: Dramatic Variations," in Shakespeare 1564-1964, ed. Edward A. Bloom], the psychic forces concentrated in that code are all the more potent for being ill-defined; and in the scene at hand, Lady Macbeth's onslaught against Macbeth—coming from a woman, after all, his sexual partner—is virtually unanswerable:

What beast was it then
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man,
And to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man....
[I. vii. 47-51]

Against Macbeth's stern but theoretical retort that he will perform only that which becomes a man, and no more, she replies that, on the contrary, by his own manly standards he will be a dull-spirited beast, no man, if
he withdraws from the plot.

Then, with a truly fiendish cunning she goes on to tie up all the strands of her argument in a single violent image, the murder of her own nursing infant. In this, of course, she re-enacts for Macbeth her earlier appeal for a strategic reversal of sex—the humiliating implication being that she would be more truly masculine in her symbolic act than he can ever be. And in offering to dash out the brains of "the babe that milks me" [I. vii. 55], in effect she ritually murders the naked babe of pity that Macbeth has just summoned up as a tutelary spirit. The upshot of this incredible mixture of insinuation and bullying is that Macbeth is forced to accept a concept of manliness that consists wholly in rampant self-seeking aggression. True masculinity has nothing to do with those more gentle virtues men are supposed to share with women as members of their kind; these are for women alone, as Lady Macbeth's violent rejections of her own femaleness prove. When she has finished the exhortation, Macbeth can only respond with a kind of over-mastered tribute to her ferocity, which would be more proper in him—"Bring forth men children only, / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" [I. vii. 72-4].

When the murder of Duncan is discovered, Macbeth betters his wife's instructions to "make our griefs and clamors roar / Upon his death" [I. vii. 78-9], and slays the grooms outright, before they can talk. Even in his state of grief and shock, the humane Macduff is astonished at this new burst of violence—"Wherefore did you so?" [II. iii. 107]—and, in a speech that verges steadily towards hysteria, Macbeth explains that he slew the grooms in a reflex of outraged allegiance and love for his murdered king. It is the praiseworthy savage and ruthless Macbeth of recent military fame who is supposed to be talking: his appeal is to a code of manly virtue he has already perverted. "Who can be wise, amazed, temperate, and furious, / Loyal and neutral, in a moment? No man" [II. iii. 108-09]. The speech runs away with itself, but after Lady Macbeth's timely collapse, Macbeth collects his wits and calls for an inquest: "Let's briefly put on manly readiness, / And meet in the hall together" [II. iii. 133-34]. "Manly" here, of course, means one thing—vengeful self-control—to the others, and something else—the ability to be crafty and dissemble—to Macbeth.

In Act III, confirming Hecate's later observation that "security / Is mortals' chiefest enemy" [III. v. 32-3]—or in this case the vexing lack of it—King Macbeth seeks to be "safely thus" by killing Banquo and cutting off his claims on the future in Fleance. Macbeth's exhortation to the three murderers is an instance of the general principle of repetition and re-enactment that governs the entire drama and helps give it its characteristic quality of compulsive and helpless action. Macbeth begins his subornation by identifying for the murderers the very same grievance against Banquo he has just named for himself—

Do you find
Your patience so predominant in your nature
That you can let this go? Are you so gospeled,
To pray for this good man and for his issue,
Whose heavy hand hath bowed you to the grave
And beggared yours forever?
[III. i. 85-90]

When the First Murderer retorts ambiguously, just as Macbeth has earlier to Lady Macbeth, "We are men, my liege" [III. i. 90], the King twists this appeal from an undefined code of manliness exactly as his wife taught him to do in I. vii—

Aye, in the catalogue ye go for men,
As hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs,
Shoughs, water rugs, and demiwolves are elept
All by the name of dogs.
[III. i. 91-4]
In protesting that he and his fellows are men, the First Murderer means that they are as capable of moral indignation and of violent response to wrongs "as the next man." But Macbeth, like his wife before him, undermines this position by declaring that this hardly qualifies them as men or even as humans, except in the merely zoological sense. There is simply no intrinsic distinction, no fundamental basis of identity to be had in declaring one's male gender and beyond this one's membership in the human race. What Macbeth in the next scene refers to as "that great bond / Which keeps me pale" [III. ii. 49-50], that shared humanity deeper than sex or class denoted in the cry "Man overboard," is here pronounced to be a mere figment valid neither as a source of positive virtue nor as the ultimate basis of moral restraint. "Real men" (the argument is old and has its trivial as well as its tragic motives) will prove their manhood in violently self-assertive action: Macbeth is, in a sense, talking here to himself, still answering his wife's aspersions.

Those aspersions return to haunt him—along with Banquo's ghost—in the banquet scene. As he recoils from the bloody apparition, Lady Macbeth hisses, predictably, "Are you a man?" and his shaky reply, "Aye, and a bold one, that dare look upon that / Which might appall the Devil" [III. iv. 57-9], she mocks with another insinuation that under duress he is womanish. One thinks of Goneril's sneer at Albany, "Marry, your manhood! Mew!" (King Lear, IV. ii. 68), but Lady Macbeth's humiliating slur is a continuation of her strategy of negative exhortation—

Oh, these flaws and starts,
Imposters to true fear, would well become
A woman's story at a winter's fire
Authorized by her grandam. Shame itself!
[III. iv. 62-5]

When the ghost reappears, Macbeth in a frenzy "quite unmanned" recapitulates as if by rote everything he has heard against his manliness. Once more there is the dubious appeal to a perverted code—"What man dare, I dare" [III. iv. 98]. And then follows the references to beasts, here prefiguring Macbeth's own fall from humaneness to bestiality—the beasts he names would be fitting adversaries:

Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,
The armed rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger,
Take any shape but that and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble.
[III. iv. 99-102]

and then an almost pathetic desire to prove himself in single combat, like the old Macbeth: "Or to be alive again, / And dare me to the desert with thy sword" [III. iv. 102-03], and finally a humiliating comparison, worthy of his wife, to the antithesis of manliness: "If trembling I inhabit then, protest me / The baby of a girl" [III. iv. 104-05].

This harrowing scene concludes with Macbeth—now isolated not just in his crimes from his peers but in his hallucination from Lady Macbeth—brooding on the emblematic meanings of blood: the gore of regicide and homicide, of retribution in the name of human blood-ties he had denied. The "bloody man" of the first scenes, whose wounds, like Macbeth's, were public tokens of his manly courage and valor, is now succeeded wholly in the play's imagery by "the secret'st man of blood" [III. iv. 125].

The final step in the degeneration of Macbeth's manliness comes in Act IV when he appears before the witches demanding to know his manifest future more certainly. The first of the prophetic apparitions, an "Armed Head," is suggestive both of the traitor Macdonwald's fate and of Macbeth's own gruesome final appearance; the second apparition, a bloody child, points backward to the "naked newborn babe" of pity and to Lady Macbeth's hypothetically murdered child, and ahead to the slaughter of Macduff's children, as well as
to Macduff himself, Macbeth's nemesis, who was from his mother's side "untimely ripped." With a fearsome irony, the prophecy of the second apparition, an object of pity, serves to release Macbeth from all basic humane obligations to his fellows. If "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" [IV. i. 80-1], then he need recognize no common denominators either of origin or of mortal vulnerability with his kind, and nothing in the name of "kindness" can interfere, it seems, with the perfection of his monstrous "manliness." "Be bloody, bold, and resolute, laugh to scorn / The power of man" [IV. i. 79-80].

The pageant of Banquo's lineage and the bad news of Macduff's flight to England, which follow immediately according to the breakneck pace of this play, only serve to confirm Macbeth in his new freedom from all kindness: henceforth, beginning with the slaughter of Macduff's family, he will act unconstrained either by moral compunction or by reason. "From this moment / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand" [IV. i. 146-47]. So, having earlier remarked, ominously, that "Returning were as tedious as go o'er" [III. iv. 137], and having just witnessed a seemingly endless procession of Scottish kings in Banquo's line, he now enters fully into what can be termed the doom of reflex and repetition, in which Lady Macbeth, with her hellish somnambulism, shares.

At this point in the play, as he so often does in the histories and tragedies, Shakespeare widens our attention beyond the fortunes of the principals; we are shown the cruel effects of such villainous causes, and much of the action on this wider stage parallels and ironically comments on the central scenes. The evils of Macbeth's epoch are dramatized in a peculiarly poignant way, for example, in IV. ii., when Lady Macduff denounces her virtuous husband to their son for what seems to her to be Macduff's unmanly, even inhuman abandonment of his family. It is a strange twisted version of Lady Macbeth's harangue and her husband's responses earlier; there is the inevitable appeal to an assumed human nature, and even the by-now-familiar comparison of man and beast—

He loves us not,
He wants the natural touch. For the poor wren,
The most diminutive of birds, will fight,
Her young ones in her nest, against the owl.
[IV. ii. 8-11]

And this poor woman, who fears her husband lacks that milk of human kindness that Lady Macbeth depletes in her spouse, ends her life with a terrible commentary on the badness of the times, in which to protest one's innocence is accounted mere womanish folly. Macbeth's reign of "manliness" prevails: "Why, then, alas, / Do I put up that womanly defense, / To say I have done no harm?" [IV. ii. 77-9]. This lament assumes a really dreadful irony in the next scene when Ross assures Malcolm in Macduff's presence that "your eye in Scotland / Would create soldiers, make our women fight / To doff their dire distress" [IV. iii. 186-88].

In this next scene, before Macduff learns of the sacrifice he has made to his patriotism, he labors to persuade young Malcolm to lead an army of "good men" in the liberation of Scotland. For the first time since the opening scenes, a concept of manly virtue that is alternative to Macbeth's is broached; it is, of course, the code that Macbeth himself once served so valorously. Malcolm shrewdly responds to the invitation with a remarkable double test of Macduff as the emissary of the Scottish loyalists—first and directly of his honesty and allegiance (is he really only another assassin sent by Macbeth?), and second and indirectly of the depth and quality of that allegiance. By representing himself vice by vice as a monster even more depraved than Macbeth, by forcing a disjunction of patriotism from morality, the politic Malcolm can determine the exact limits of Macduff's offered support. As King he could not, presumably, accept an allegiance so desperate and indiscriminant that it would ignore the total viciousness he paints himself with. (pp. 286-94)

Given Macduff's straightforward soldierly goodness, his fervent hopes for his country, and his rant, it is a deeply cruel if necessary test, one that the unhappy patriot must painfully "fail" in order to pass. In
its tone and in the logic of its placement, the entire scene in London is analogous to that remarkable sequence of scenes in 2 Henry IV—Hal's oblique denunciation of Poins and other small beer [II. ii], Lady Percy's denunciation of Northumberland [II. iii], and Hal and Poin's spying on and rather brutal exposure of Falstaff [II. iv]. There, as here, a persistent cruelty between allies seems to signal the beginnings of a drastic homeopathic cure of the whole diseased nation.

In Macbeth, this homeopathy takes a predictable form: in order to purge Scotland of Macbeth's diseased "manliness," the forces of right and order must to some extent embrace that inhuman code. As Macduff collapses under the news of his family's slaughter, Malcolm exhorts him to convert his grief and guilt without delay into "manly" vengeful rage: "Be comforted. Let's make us medicines of our great revenge / To cure this deadly grief.... Dispute it like a man." To which advice Macduff cries back, "I shall do so, But I must feel it like a man" [IV. iii. 214-15; 220-21]. Nowhere in the play is there a more cruel disjunction of the moral claims on "Man," between a narrow code of manliness, and a general "natural" humaneness. Soon Macduff is driven into that familiar harsh polarization according to sex of human feelings that should belong to the race as a whole: "Oh I could play the woman with mine eyes" [IV. iii. 230]. In other circumstances, Macduff would be profoundly unworthy of his manhood if he could not feel and show his losses, and Malcolm's impatient urgings would simply be intolerable. As it is, if his strategy is cruelly necessary, there is an unpleasant note of politic satisfaction in his endorsement of Macduff's wrenching of private grief into public wrath, the wrath, after all, that will place Malcolm on the throne: he says, briskly, "This tune goes manly" [IV. iii. 235]. As Edmund says to the murderer of Cordelia in a very different context, "men / Are as the times is" [King Lear, V. iii. 30-1]: the reformers, it seems, to a considerable degree, as well as the evildoers. Whatever his kingly virtues otherwise, it seems clear that Malcolm will never rule Scotland with the simple graciousness and humane trust of a Duncan. The times forbid it; Macbeth's savage reign requires that he be succeeded by a king of cold blood and clear mind who stands with that Shakespearean company distinguished by "little love but much policy" [cf. Richard II, V. i. 84]....

In the concluding scenes, while Macbeth betrays his special preoccupations by referring to "the boy Malcolm" and abusing his servant as "lily-livered boy," [V. iii. 2,15] Malcolm has, we are told, enlisted the support of a whole generation of untried "boys" whose valorous service in his great cause will "Protest their first of manhood" [V. ii. 11]. Young Siward is their leader, and his subsequent brave, fatal encounter with Macbeth is recognized by all as evidence of a resurgent true manliness in Scotland, based (as Macbeth's conduct was at the beginning!) on selflessness and heroic violence in the cause of right and justice. Old Siward refuses to allow Malcolm to lionize his dead son beyond the simple terms of Ross's eulogy:

He only lived but till he was a man,
The which no sooner had his prowess confirmed
In the unshrinking station where he fought
But like a man he died.
[V. ix. 6-9]

The larger questions in this familiar declaration of praise—"What is a man? What should he be? What standards of manhood?" are begged, as they were in the beginning of Macbeth's story: indeed, there is again the existentialistic implication that man's nature is not an a priori [presumptive] constant but rather an evolving and unstable set of possibilities. But if young Siward's kind of manliness is seen in the context of the story as being ambiguous, volatile, capable of hideous perversions as well as of glories, it is nonetheless offered to us dramatically as the only moral alternative in the play, in the familiar Shakespearean manner, a hypothetical code has been realistically tested in action for us as viewers—not merely nullified and replaced with another set of unexamined verities. No one would deny that young Siward has indeed achieved a form of manhood—but the structure of the play allows us to cherish no illusions about that kind of achievement.
The swift resurgence of a measure of sympathy for Macbeth in the last scenes has always been recognized as one of Shakespeare's most brilliant manipulations of tone. As Wayne Booth [see excerpt in section on Macbeth's character] and others have demonstrated, it is based upon our almost insupportable intimacy with Macbeth—we know him as no one in his own world does—and upon the terrible imaginative fullness of his knowledge of his crimes, if not of the effects of those crimes on himself. What triggers an access of sympathy in the final scenes is chiefly his return to a semblance of direct, uncomplex action, "we'll die with harness on our back," [V. v. 51] so painfully suggestive of the old Macbeth. But now he is champion of nothing human or humane; he must "try the last" [V. viii. 32] in utter alienation from the community of men, which in some other life would have granted him, as to any man, "that which should accompany old age, / As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends" [V. iii. 24-5]. At the last, all the invidious comparisons of earlier scenes between men and beasts come due as he feels himself reduced to the state of a solitary animal in a bear-baiting: "bear-like I must fight the course" [V. vii. 1-2].

Nowhere is Macbeth's alien condition more starkly revealed than at the moment of his wife's death in Scene v. As he and his followers doubtfully parade on stage with banners and prepare for the siege of Dunsinane, there comes a "cry of women" offstage [s.d., V. v. 7]. It is a hair-raising stroke of theater, worthy of the Greeks: at the death of the ambitious wife who would have unsexed herself to provoke her husband into forgetting his ties with humanity, the women of Dunsinane raise the immemorial voice of their sex in grief and sympathy, so long banished from Scotland. It is as if a spell is broken; all the deaths in the play are bewailed, those of the victims as well as that of the murderer—but so barren is Macbeth now of humane feeling that it takes Seyton to tell him that what he has heard is "the cry of women" [V. v. 8], and when he learns it is his own wife who has died, he can only shrug wearily over what he cannot feel, and then lament a life devoid of all human meaning: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" [V. v. 19]. After a brutal career of striving "manfully" to impose his own consequentiality upon the future, Macbeth now foresees a future of mere repetitive subsequence—"time and the hour" do not "run through the roughest day" but are stuck fast in it [I. iii. 148].

The First Witch's curse against the Master of the Tiger, "I shall drain him dry as hay" [I. iii. 18], has come true in Macbeth's soul.

Yet it is still a human soul, and in the last scene Shakespeare seems to take pains to enforce our unwilling rediscovery of that fact. Confronted at last by Macduff, Macbeth recoils momentarily with an unwonted remorse: "get thee back, my soul is too much charged / With blood of thine already" [V. viii. 5-6]. And when he perceives that Macduff is the object of the witches' equivocation, the mortal man Fate has chosen to be its instrument against him, Macbeth gains the last and fullest fragment of tragic knowledge the dramatist grants him in this tragedy of limited and helpless knowledge. Though he confesses that Macduff's revelation "hath cowed my better part of man" [V. viii. 18]—meaning the reckless, savage manhood he has embraced—the insight itself suggests a step back towards the common human condition and its "great bond":

be these juggling fiends no more believed
That palter with us in a double sense,
That keep the word of promise to our ear
And break it to our hope. I'll not fight with thee.
[V. viii. 19-22]

The plurality of these pronouns is more than royal: having already extrapolated from his own ruin to a nihilistic view of all human life in the "tomorrow" speech, Macbeth here generalizes validly for the human race at large. Fate is enigmatic to us all; it is, he realizes too late, one of the immutable common denominators of our condition; no career of rampant "manly" self-assertion can hope to circumvent or control it.

In this frame of mind, then, at least tenuously reawakened to the circumstances binding him to his race, Macbeth is roused by Macduff's threat that he will be exhibited "as our rarer monsters are" if captured alive [V. viii. 25], and hurls himself into single combat for the first time since he was "valor's minion." There is no
more question of redemption than of escape, of course, as Macbeth himself knows: but who would deny a stirring of fellow-feeling at this spectacle of a single mortal man actively facing his mortality, "trying the last" [cf. V. viii. 32]? When Macduff reappears bearing Macbeth's severed head, and Malcolm triumphantly announces his succession to "this dead butcher and his fiendlike queen" [V. ix. 35], it seems impossible to deny the sense of a dramatic imbalance between the claims of justice and those of humaneness. We know Macbeth far better than do any of the Scottish worthies who celebrate his gruesome death; we have been privy to all the steps of his ruin: the tragic paradox in his nature is that the medium of his degeneration—his extraordinary imaginative susceptibility—is also the medium of our never wholly suspended empathy with him. Such is the main thrust of these concluding scenes: they reveal Macbeth to us as a monster of degenerate "manliness"—but as a human monster for all that. The circle of human sympathy and kindness, broken by Macbeth's career of regicide and slaughter, is reformed: narrowly and vengefully, on-stage; broadly and with a heavy sense of man's undefinable limits and capabilities, in the audience. (pp. 295-99)


**Criticism: Imagery**

The total meaning of [Macbeth] depends on a complex of interwoven patterns and the imagery must be considered in relation to character and structure.

One group of images to which Cleanth Brooks called attention [in his The Well-Wrought Urn] was that concerned with babes. It has been suggested by Muriel C. Bradbrook that Shakespeare may have noticed in the general description of the manners of Scotland included in Holinshed's Chronicles that every Scotswoman 'would take intolerable pains to bring up and nourish her own children [Shakespeare Survey 4 (1951)]; and H. N. Paul pointed out that one of the topics selected for debate before James I, during his visit to Oxford in the summer of 1605, was whether a man's character was influenced by his nurse's milk [The Royal Play of 'Macbeth']. Whatever the origin of the images in Macbeth relating to breast-feeding, Shakespeare uses them for a very dramatic purpose. Their first appearance is in Lady Macbeth's invocation of the evil spirits to take possession of her:

```plaintext
Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief.
[I. v. 47-50]
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They next appear in the scene where she incites Macbeth to the murder of Duncan:

```plaintext
I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me—
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.
[I. vii. 54-9]
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In between these two passages Macbeth himself, debating whether to do the deed, admits that
Pity, like a naked new-born babe
Striding the blast,
[I. vii. 21-21]

would plead against it; and Lady Macbeth, when she first considers whether she can persuade her husband to kill Duncan, admits that she fears his nature:

It is too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way.
[I. v. 17-18]

Later in the play, Malcolm, when he is pretending to be worse even than Macbeth, says that he loves crime:

Nay, had I pow’r, I should
Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell,
Uproar the universal peace, confound All unity on earth.
[IV. iii. 97-100]

In these passages the babe symbolizes pity, and the necessity for pity, and milk symbolizes humanity, tenderness, sympathy, natural human feelings, the sense of kinship, all of which have been outraged by the murderers. Lady Macbeth can nerve herself to the deed only by denying her real nature; and she can overcome Macbeth's scruples only by making him ignore his feelings of human-kindness—his kinship with his fellow-men.

Cleanth Brooks suggests therefore that it is appropriate that one of the three apparitions should be a bloody child, since Macduff is converted into an avenger by the murder of his wife and babes. On one level, the bloody child stands for Macduff; on another level, it is the naked new-born babe whose pleadings Macbeth has ignored. Helen Gardner took Cleanth Brooks to task for considering these images in relation to one another. She argued that in his comments on 'Pity, like a naked new-born babe' [I. vii. 21] he had sacrificed a Shakespearian depth of human feeling ... by attempting to interpret an image by the aid of what associations it happens to arouse in him, and by being more interested in making symbols of babes fit each other than in listening to what Macbeth is saying. Macbeth is a tragedy and not a melodrama or a symbolic drama of retribution. The reappearance of ‘the babe symbol’ in the apparition scene and in Macduff’s revelation of his birth has distracted the critic’s attention from what deeply moves the imagination and the conscience in this vision of a whole world weeping at the inhumanity of helplessness betrayed and innocence and beauty destroyed. It is the judgment of the human heart that Macbeth fears here, and the punishment which the speech foreshadows is not that he will be cut down by Macduff, but that having murdered his own humanity he will enter a world of appalling loneliness, of meaningless activity, unloved himself, and unable to love. [The Business of Criticism]

Although this is both eloquent and true, it does not quite dispose of Brooks's interpretation of the imagery. Miss Gardner shows that, elsewhere in Shakespeare, 'a cherub is thought of as not only young, beautiful, and innocent, but as associated with the virtue of patience'; and that in the Macbeth passage the helpless babe and the innocent and beautiful cherub "call out the pity and love by which Macbeth is judged. It is not terror of heaven's vengeance which makes him pause, but the terror of moral isolation." Yet, earlier in the same speech Macbeth expresses fear of retribution in this life—fear that he himself will have to drink the ingredients of his own poisoned chalice—and his comparison of Duncans virtues to 'angels, trumpet-tongued' [I. vii. 19] implies a fear of judgment in the life to come, notwithstanding his boast that he would 'jump' it. We may assume, perhaps, that the discrepancy between the argument of the speech and the imagery employed is deliberate. On
the surface Macbeth appears to be giving merely prudential reasons for not murdering Duncan; but Shakespeare makes him reveal by the imagery he employs that he, or his unconscious mind, is horrified by the thought of the deed to which he is being driven.

Miss Gardner does not refer to the breast-feeding images—even Cleanth Brooks does not mention one of the most significant—yet all these images are impressive in their contexts and, taken together, they coalesce into a symbol of humanity, kinship and tenderness violated by Macbeth's crimes. Miss Gardner is right in demanding that the precise meaning and context of each image should be considered, but wrong, I believe, in refusing to see any significance in the group as a whole. Macbeth, of course, is a tragedy; but I know of no valid definition of tragedy which would prevent the play from being at the same time a symbolic drama of retribution.

Another important group of images is concerned with sickness and medicine, and it is significant that they all appear in the last three acts of the play after Macbeth has ascended the throne; for Scotland is suffering from the disease of tyranny, which can be cured, as fever was thought to be cured, only by bleeding or purgation. The tyrant, indeed, uses sickness imagery of himself. He tells the First Murderer that so long as Banquo is alive he wears his health but sickly; when he hears of Fleance's escape he exclaims 'Then comes my fit again' [III. iv. 20]; and he envies Duncan in the grave, sleeping after life's fitful fever, since life itself is one long illness. In the last act of the play a doctor, called in to diagnose Lady Macbeth's illness, confesses that he cannot

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minister to a mind diseas'd, Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, Raze out the written troubles of the brain, And with some sweet oblivious antidote Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff Which weighs upon the heart.
[V. iii. 40-51]
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Macbeth then professes to believe that what is amiss with Scotland is not his own evil tyranny but the English army of liberation:

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What rhubarb, cyme, or what purgative drug Would scour these English hence?
[V. iii. 55-6]
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On the other side, the victims of tyranny look forward to wholesome days when Scotland will be freed. Malcolm says that Macbeth's very name blisters their tongues and he laments that 'each new day a gash' [IV. iii. 40] is added to Scotland's wounds. In the last act Caithness refers to Malcolm as 'the medicine of the sickly weal',

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And with him pour we in our country's purge Each drop of us.
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Lennox adds:

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Or so much as it needs To dew the sovereign flower and drown the weeds.
[V. ii. 27-30]
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Macbeth is the disease from which Scotland is suffering; Malcolm, the rightful king, is the sovereign flower, both royal and curative. Macbeth, it is said,
Cannot buckle his distemper'd cause  
Within the belt of rule.  
[V, ii. 15-16]

James I, in *A Counter-blast to Tobacco*, referred to himself as 'the proper Phisician of his Politicke-bodie', whose duty it was 'to purge it of all those diseases, by Medicines meet for the same'. It is possible that Shakespeare had read this pamphlet, although, of course, disease-imagery is to be found in most of the plays written about this time. In *Hamlet* and *Coriolanus* it is applied to the body politic, as indeed it was by many writers on political theory. Shakespeare may have introduced the King's Evil as an allusion to James I's reluctant use of his supposed healing powers; but even without this topical reference, the incident provides a contrast to the evil supernatural represented by the Weird Sisters and is therefore dramatically relevant.

The contrast between good and evil is brought out in a variety of ways. There is not merely the contrast between the good and bad kings, which becomes explicit in the scene where Malcolm falsely accuses himself of avarice, lechery, cruelty and all of Macbeth's vices, and disclaims the possession of the king-becoming graces:

> Justice, verity, temperance, stableness,  
> Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,  
> Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude.  
> [IV. iii. 92-4]

There is also a contrast throughout the play between the powers of light and darkness. It has often been observed that many scenes are set in darkness. Duncan arrives at Inverness as night falls; he is murdered during the night; Banquo returns from his last ride as night is again falling; Lady Macbeth has light by her continually; and even the daylight scenes during the first part of the play are mostly gloomy in their setting—a blasted heath, wrapped in mist, a dark cavern. The murder of Duncan is followed by darkness at noon—'dark night strangles the travelling lamp' [II. iv. 7]. Before the murder Macbeth prays to the stars to hide their fires and Lady Macbeth invokes the night to conceal their crime:

> Come, thick night,  
> And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,  
> That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
> Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark  
> To cry 'Hold, hold'.  
> [I. v. 50-4]

Macbeth, as he goes towards the chamber of the sleeping Duncan, describes how

> o'er the one half-world  
> Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse  
> The curtain'd sleep.  
> [I. v. 49-51]

The word 'night' echoes through the first two scenes of the third act; and Macbeth invokes night to conceal the murder of Banquo:

> Come, seeling night,  
> Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day.  
> Light thickens, and the crow  
> Makes wing to th' rooky wood;
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.
[III. ii. 46-53]

In the scene in England and in the last act of the play—except for the sleep-walking scene—the darkness is replaced by light. The symbolism is obvious. In many of these contexts night and darkness are associated with evil, and day and light are linked with good. The 'good things of day' [III. ii. 52] are contrasted with 'night's black agents' [in. ii. 53]; and, in the last act, day stands for the victory of the forces of liberation [V, iv. 1; V. vii. 27; V. ix. 3]. The 'midnight hags' are 'the instruments of darkness' [I. iii. 124]; and some editors believe that when Malcolm (at the end of Act IV) says that 'The Powers above / Put on their instruments' [IV. iii. 238-39] he is referring to their human instruments—Malcolm, Macduff and their soldiers.

The opposition between the good and evil supernatural is paralleled by similar contrasts between angel and devil, heaven and hell, truth and falsehood—and the opposites are frequently juxtaposed:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good.
[I. iii. 130-31]

Merciful powers
Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature
Gives way to in repose!
[II. i. 7-9]

It is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell.
[II. i. 63-4]

Several critics have pointed out the opposition in the play between night and day, life and death, grace and evil, a contrast which is reiterated more than four hundred times.

The evidence for this has gone beyond imagery simile, but the visual symbols implied by the dialogue, which would be visible in performance, and even the iteration of key words... Macbeth is about blood; and from the appearance of the bloody sergeant in the second scene of the play to the last scene of all, we have a continual vision of blood. Macbeth's sword in the battle 'smok'd with bloody execution' [I. ii. 18]; he and Banquo seemed to 'bathe in reeking wounds' [I. ii. 39]; the Sergeant's 'gashes cry for help' [I. ii. 42]. The Second Witch comes from the bloody task of killing swine. The visionary dagger is stained with 'gouts of blood' [II. i. 46]. Macbeth, after the murder, declares that not all great Neptune's ocean will cleanse his hands:

this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.
[II. ii. 58-60]

Duncan is spoken of as the fountain of his sons' blood; his wounds

look'd like a breach in nature
For ruin's wasteful entrance.
[II. iii. 113-14]
The world had become a 'bloody stage'. Macbeth, before the murder of Banquo, invokes the 'bloody and invisible hand' of night [III. ii. 48]. We are told of the twenty trenched gashes on Banquo's body and his ghost shakes his 'gory locks' at Macbeth, who is convinced that 'blood will have blood' [III. iv. 121]. At the end of the banquet scene, he confesses wearily that he is 'stepp'd so far' in blood, that

    should I wade no more,
    Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
    [III. iv. 136-37]

The Second Apparition, a bloody child, advises Macbeth to be 'bloody, bold, and resolute' [IV. i. 79]. Malcolm declares that Scotland bleeds,

    and each new day a gash
    Is added to her wounds.
    [IV. iii. 40-1]

Lady Macbeth, sleep-walking, tries in vain to remove the 'damned spot' from her hands:

    Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.
    [V. i. 50-1]

In the final scene, Macbeth's severed head is displayed on a pole. As [Jan] Kott has recently reminded us, the subject of the play is murder, and the prevalence of blood ensures that we shall never forget the physical realities in metaphysical overtones.

Equally important is the iteration of sleep. The first statement of the theme is when the First Witch curses the Master of the Tiger:

    Sleep shall neither night nor day
    Hang upon his penthouse lid.
    [I. iii. 19-20]

After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth and his wife

    sleep
    In the affliction of these terrible dreams
    That shake us nightly;
    [III. ii. 17-19]

while Duncan, 'after life's fitful fever . . . sleeps well' [III. ii. 23]. Anonymous lord looks forward to the overthrow of the tyrant, when they will be able to sleep in peace. Because of 'a great perturbation in nature', Lady Macbeth

    is troubled with thick coming fancies
    That keep her from her rest.
    [V. iii. 38-9]

The key passage in the theme of sleeplessness . . . occurs just after the murder of Duncan, when Macbeth hears a voice which cries 'Sleep no more!' [II. ii. 38]. It is really the echo of his own conscience. As [A. C] Bradley noted, the voice 'denounced on him, as if his three names [Glamis, Cawdor, Macbeth] gave him three personalities to suffer in, the doom of sleeplessness' [Shakespearean Tragedy]; and, as [J. M.] Murry puts it:
He has murdered Sleep, that is 'the death of each day's life'—that daily death of Time which makes Time human. [Shakespeare]

The murder of a sleeping guest, the murder of a sleeping king, the murder of a saintly old man, the murder, as it were, of sleep itself, carries with it the appropriate retribution of insomnia.

As Murry's comment suggests, the theme of sleep is linked with that of time. Macbeth is promised by the Weird Sisters that he will be king 'hereafter' and Banquo wonders if they 'can look into the seeds of time' [I. iii. 58]. Macbeth, tempted by the thought of murder, declares that 'Present fears / Are less than horrible imaginings' [I. iii. 137-38] and decides that 'Time and the hour runs through the roughest day' [I. iii. 147]. Lady Macbeth says she feels 'The future in the instant' [I. v. 58]. In his soliloquy in the last scene of Act I, Macbeth speaks of himself as 'here upon this bank and shoal of time' [I. vii. 6], time being contrasted with the sea of eternity. He pretends that he would not worry about the future, or about the life to come, if he could be sure of success in the present; and his wife implies that the conjunction of time and place for the murder will never recur. Just before the murder, Macbeth reminds himself of the exact time and place, so that he can relegate (as Stephen Spender suggests) 'the moment to the past from which it will never escape into the future' [see excerpt in section on Time]. Macbeth is troubled by his inability to say amen, because he dimly realizes he has forfeited the possibility of blessing and because he knows that he has become 'the deed's creature'. The nightmares of the guilty pair and the return of Banquo from the grave symbolize the haunting of the present by the past. When Macbeth is informed of his wife's death, he describes how life has become for him a succession of meaningless days, the futility he has brought upon himself by his crimes:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.
[V. v. 19-23]

At the very end of the play, Macduff announces that with the death of the tyrant 'The time is free' [V. ix. 21] and Malcolm promises, without 'a large expense of time' [V. ix. 26] to do what is necessary ('which would be planted newly with the time' [V. ix. 31]) and to bring back order from chaos 'in measure, time, and place' [V. ix. 39].

From one point of view Macbeth can be regarded as a play about the disruption of order through evil, and its final restoration. The play begins with what the witches call a hurly-burly and ends with the restoration of order by Malcolm. Order is represented throughout by the bonds of loyalty; and chaos is represented by the powers of darkness with their upsetting of moral values ('Fair is foul and foul is fair' [I. i. 11]). The witches can raise winds to fight against the churches, to sink ships and destroy buildings: they are the enemies both of religion and of civilization. Lady Macbeth invokes the evil spirits to take possession of her; and, after the murder of Duncan, Macbeth's mind be-suffer' [III. ii. 16] merely to be freed from his nightmares. Again, in his conjuration of the witches in the cauldron scene, he is prepared to risk absolute chaos, 'even till destruction sicken' through surfeit [IV. i. 60], rather than not obtain an answer. In his last days, Macbeth is 'aweary of the sun' and he wishes 'the estate of the world' were undone [V. v. 48-9]. Order in Scotland, even the moral order in the universe, can be restored only by his death. (pp. 45-51)

All through the play ideas of order and chaos are juxtaposed. When Macbeth is first visited by temptation his 'single state of man' is shaken and 'nothing is but what is not' [I. iii. 140-42]. In the next scene [I. iv] Shakespeare presents ideas of loyalty, duty, and the reward of faithful service, in contrast both to the treachery of the dead Thane of Cawdor and to the treacherous thoughts of the new thane. Lady Macbeth prays to be spared 'compunctious visitings of nature' [I. v. 45] and in the next scene, after the description of the 'pleasant
seat' of the castle with its images of natural beauty, she expresses her gratitude and loyalty to the king. Before the murder, Macbeth reminds himself of the threefold tie of loyalty which binds him to Duncan, as kinsman, subject and host. He is afraid that the very stones will cry out against the unnaturalness of the murder, which is, in fact, accompanied by strange portents:

Lamentings heard i’ th’ air, strange screams of death,
And prophesyng with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confus’d events
New hatch’d to th’ woeful time.
[II. iii. 56-9]

The frequent iteration of the word 'strange' is one of the ways by which Shakespeare underlines the disruption of the natural order. (pp. 51-2)

Reference must be made to two other groups of images . . ., those relating to equivocation and those which are concerned with with the contrast between what the Porter calls desire and performance. The theme of equivocation runs all through the play . . . [It] links up with 'the equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth' [V. v. 42-3], the juggling fiends 'That keep the word of promise to our ear / And break it to our hope' [V. vi 21-2], and Macbeth's own equivocation after the murder of Duncan:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had liv'd a blessed time; for, from this instant,
There's nothing serious in mortality—
All is but toys; renown and grace is dead;
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of.
[II. iii. 91-6]

Macbeth's intention is to avert suspicion from himself by following his wife's advice to make their 'griefs and clamour roar upon' Duncan's death [I. vii. 78]. But, as he speaks the words, the audience knows that he has unwittingly spoken the truth. Instead of lying like truth, he has told the truth while intending to deceive. As he expresses it later, when full realization has come to him, life has become meaningless, a succession of empty tomorrows, 'a tale told by an idiot' [V. v. 26-7].

The gap between desire and performance, enunciated by the Porter, is expressed over and over again by Macbeth and his wife. It takes the form, most strikingly, in the numerous passages contrasting eye and hand, culminating in Macbeth's cry—

What hands are here? Ha! They pluck out mine eyes—
[II. ii. 56]

and in the scene before the murder of Banquo when the bloodstained hand is no longer Macbeth's, but Night's:

Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale.
[III. ii. 46-50]
In the sleep-walking scene, Lady Macbeth's unavailing efforts to wash the smell of the blood from her hand symbolize the indelibility of guilt; and Angus in the next scene declares that Macbeth feels

His secret murders sticking on his hands.
[V. ii. 17]

The soul is damned for the deeds committed by the hand. (pp. 52-3)

A study of the imagery and symbolism in Macbeth does not radically alter one's interpretation of the play. It would, indeed, be suspect if it did. In reading some modern criticisms of Shakespeare one has the feeling that the critic is reading between the lines and creating from the interstices a play rather different from the one which Shakespeare wrote and similar to a play the critic himself might have written. Such interpretations lead us away from Shakespeare; they drop a veil between us and the plays; and they substitute a formula for the living reality, a philosophy or a theology instead of a dramatic presentation of life. I have not attempted to reshape Macbeth to a particular ideological image, nor selected parts of the play to prove a thesis. Some selection had to be made for reasons of space, but I have tried to make the selection representative of the whole.

We must not imagine, of course, that Macbeth is merely an elaborate pattern of imagery. It is a play; and in the theatre we ought to recover, as best we may, a state of critical innocence. We should certainly not attempt to notice the images of clothing or breast-feeding or count the allusions to blood or sleep. But, just as Shakespeare conveys to us the unconscious minds of the characters by means of the imagery, so, in watching the play, we may be totally unconscious of the patterns of imagery and yet absorb them unconsciously by means of our imaginative response to the poetry. In this way they will be subsumed under the total experience of the play. (p. 53)


Criticism: Macbeth

Wayne C. Booth

Put even in its simplest terms, the problem Shakespeare gave himself in Macbeth was a tremendous one. Take a good man, a noble man, a man admired by all who know him—and destroy him, not only physically and emotionally, as the Greeks destroyed their heroes, but also morally and intellectually. As if this were not difficult enough as a dramatic hurdle, while transforming him into one of the most despicable mortals conceivable, maintain him as a tragic hero—that is, keep him so sympathetic that, when he comes to his death, the audience will pity rather than detest him and will be relieved to see him out of his misery rather than pleased to see him destroyed. Put in Shakespeare's own terms: take a "noble" man, full of "conscience" and "the milk of human kindness" [I. v. 17], and make of him a "dead butcher" [V. ix. 35], yet keep him an object of pity rather than hatred. If we thus artificially reconstruct the problem as it might have existed before the play was written, we see that, in choosing these "terminal points" and these terminal intentions, Shakespeare makes almost impossible demands on his dramatic skill, although at the same time he insures that, if he succeeds at all, he will succeed magnificently. If the trick can be turned, it will inevitably be a great one. (p. 17)

I

The first step in convincing us that Macbeth's fall is a genuinely tragic occurrence is to convince us that there was, in reality, a fall: we must believe that Macbeth was once a man whom we could admire, a man with great potentialities. One way to convince us would have been to show him ... in action as an admirable man. But,
although this is possible in a leisurely novel, it would, in a play, have wasted time needed for the important events, which begin only with Macbeth's great temptation at the conclusion of the opening battle. Thus the superior choice in this case (although it would not necessarily always be so) is to begin your representation of the action with the first real temptation to the fall and to use testimony by other characters to establish your protagonist's prior goodness. We are thus given, from the beginning, sign after sign that Macbeth's greatest nobility was reached at a point just prior to the opening of the play. When the play begins, he has already coveted the crown, as is shown by his excessively nervous reaction to the witches' prophecy; it is indeed likely that he has already considered foul means of obtaining it. But, in spite of this wickedness already present to his mind as a possibility, we have ample reason to think Macbeth a man worthy of our admiration. He is "brave" and "valiant," a "worthy gentleman"; Duncan calls him "noble Macbeth." These epithets have an ironic quality only in retrospect; when they are first applied, one has no reason to doubt them. Indeed, they are true epithets, or they would have been true if applied, say, only a few days or months earlier.

Of course, this testimony to his prior virtue given by his friends in the midst of other business would not carry the spectators for long with any sympathy for Macbeth if it were not continued in several other forms. We have the testimony of Lady Macbeth (the unimpeachable testimony of a "bad" person castigating the goodness of a "good" person):

Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full of the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou' wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win.
[I. v. 16-22]

No verbal evidence would be enough, however, if we did not see in Macbeth himself signs of its validity, since we have already seen many signs that he is not the good man that the witnesses seem to believe. Thus the best evidence we have of his essential goodness is his vacillation before the murder. Just as Raskolnikov is tormented [in Dostoevski's Crime and Punishment] and just as we ourselves—virtuous theater viewers—would be tormented, so Macbeth is tormented before the prospect of his own crime. Indeed, much as he wants the kingship, he decides in Scene iii against the murder:

If chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me,
Without my stir. . . .
[I. iii. 143-44]

And when he first meets Lady Macbeth he is resolved not to murder Duncan. In fact, as powerful a rhetorician as she is, she has all she can do to get him back on the course of murder.

In addition, Macbeth's ensuing soliloquy not only weighs the possible bad practical consequences of his act but shows him perfectly aware, in a way an evil man would not be, of the moral values involved:

He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off... [I. vii. 12-16]

In this speech we see again, as we saw in the opening of the play, Shakespeare's wonderful economy: the very speech which shows Macbeth to best advantage is the one which shows the audience how very bad his contemplated act is, since Duncan is blameless. One need only think of the same speech if it were dealing with a king who deserves to be assassinated or if it were given by another character commenting on Macbeth's action, to see how right it is as it stands.

After this soliloquy Macbeth announces again to Lady Macbeth that he will not go on ("We will proceed no further in this business" [I. vii. 31]), but her eloquence is too much for him. Under her jibes at his "unmanliness," he progresses from a kind of petulant, but still honorable, boasting ("I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none" [I. vii. 46-7]), through a state of amoral consideration of mere expediency ("If I should fail?" [I. vii. 59]), to complete resolution, but still with a full understanding of the wickedness of his act ("I am settled... this terrible feat" [I. viii. 80]). There is never any doubt, first that he is bludgeoned into the deed by Lady Macbeth's superior rhetoric and force of character and by the pressure of unfamiliar circumstances (including the witches) and, second, that even in the final decision to go through with it he is extremely troubled by a guilty conscience ("False face must hide what the false heart doth know" [I. vii. 82]). In the entire dagger soliloquy he is clearly suffering from the realization of the horror of the "bloody business" ahead. He sees fully and painfully the wickedness of the course he has chosen, but not until after the deed, when the knocking has commenced, do we realize how terrifyingly alive his conscience is: "To know my deed, 't were best not know myself. / Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!" [II. ii. 70-1]. This is the wish of a "good" man who, though he has become a "bad" man, still thinks and reels as a good man would.

To cite one last example of Shakespeare's pains in this matter, we have the testimony to Macbeth's character offered by Hecate:

And which is worse, all you have done
Hath been but for a wayward son,
Spiteful and wrathful, who, as others do,
Loves for his own ends, not for you.
[III. v. 10-14]

This reaffirmation that Macbeth is not a true son of evil comes, interestingly enough, immediately after the murder of Banquo, at a time when the audience needs a reminder of Macbeth's fundamental nobility.

The evil of his acts is thus built upon the knowledge that he is not a naturally evil man but a man who has every potentiality for goodness. This potentiality and its frustration are the chief ingredients of the tragedy of Macbeth. Macbeth is a man whose progressive external misfortunes seem to produce, and at the same time seem to be produced by, his parallel progression from great goodness to great wickedness. Our emotional involvement (which perhaps should not be simplified under the term "pity" or "pity and fear") is thus a combination of two kinds of regret: (1) We regret that any potentially good man should come to such a bad end: "What a pity that things should have gone this way, that things should be this way!" (2) We regret even more the destruction of this particular man, a man who is not only morally sympathetic but also intellectually and emotionally interesting. In eliciting both these kinds of regret to such a high degree, Shakespeare goes beyond his predecessors and establishes trends which are still working themselves out in literature. The first kind—never used at all by classical dramatists, who never employed a genuinely degenerative plot—has been attempted again and again by modern novelists. Their difficulty has usually been that they have relied too completely on a general humane response in the reader and too little on a realized prior height or potentiality.
from which to fall. The protagonists are shown succumbing to their environment—or, as in so many "sociological" novels, already succumbed—and the reader is left to himself to infer that something worth bothering about has gone to waste, that things might have been otherwise, that there is any real reason to react emotionally to the final destruction. The second kind—almost unknown to classical dramatists, whose characters are never "original" or "fresh" in the modern sense—has been attempted in ever greater extremes since Shakespeare, until one finds many works in which mere interest in particular characteristics completely supplants emotional response to events involving men with interesting characteristics. The pathos of Bloom [in James Joyce's *Ulysses*], for example, is an attenuated pathos, just as the comedy of Bloom is an attenuated comedy; one is not primarily moved to laughter or tears by events involving great characters, as in *Macbeth*, but rather one is primarily interested in details about characters. It can be argued whether this is a gain or a loss to literature, when considered in general. Certainly, one would rather read a modern novel like *Ulysses*, with all its faults on its head, than many of the older dramas or epics involving "great" characters in "great" events. But it can hardly be denied that one of Shakespeare's triumphs is his success in doing many things at once which lesser writers have since done only one at a time. He has all the generalized effect of classical tragedy. We lament the "bad fortune" of a great man who has known good fortune. To this he adds the much more poignant (at least to us) pity one feels in observing the moral destruction of a great man who has once known goodness. And yet with all this he combines the pity one feels when one observes a highly characterized individual—whom one knows intimately, as it were, in whom one is interested—going to destruction. One difference between watching Macbeth go to destruction and watching the typical modern hero, whether in the drama (say, Willy Loman [in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*]) or in the novel (say, Jake [in *The Sun Also Rises*] or any other of Hemingway's heroes), is that in *Macbeth* there is some "going." Willy Loman doesn't have very far to fall; he begins the play on the verge of suicide, and at the end of the play he has committed suicide. Even if we assume that the "beginning" is the time covered in the earliest of the flashbacks, we have not "far to go" from there to Willy's destruction. It is true that our contemporary willingness to exalt the potentialities of the average man makes Willy's fall seem to us a greater one than it really is, dramatically. But the reliance on convention will, of course, sooner or later dictate a decline in the play's effectiveness. *Macbeth* continues to be effective at least in part because everything necessary for a complete response to a complete action is given to us. A highly individualized, noble man is sent to complete moral, intellectual, and physical destruction.

II

But no matter how carefully the terminal points of the drama are selected and impressed on the spectator's mind, the major problem of how to represent such a "plot" still remains. Shakespeare has the tremendous task of trying to keep two contradictory dynamic streams moving simultaneously: the stream of events showing Macbeth's growing wickedness and the stream of circumstances producing and maintaining our sympathy for him. In effect, each succeeding atrocity, marking another step toward complete depravity, must be so surrounded by contradictory circumstances as to make us feel that, in spite of the evidence before our eyes, Macbeth is still somehow admirable.

The first instance of this is the method of treating Duncan's murder. The chief point here is Shakespeare's care in avoiding any "rendering" or representation of the murder itself. It is, in fact, not even narrated. We hear only the details of how the guards reacted and how Macbeth reacted to their cries. We see nothing. There is nothing about the actual dagger strokes; there is no report of the dying cries of the good old king. We have only Macbeth's conscience-stricken lament for having committed the deed. Thus what would be an intolerable act if depicted with any vividness becomes relatively bearable when seen only afterward in the light of Macbeth's suffering and remorse. This may seem ordinary enough; it is always convenient to have murders take place offstage. But if one compares the handling of this scene, where the perpetrator must remain sympathetic, with the handling of the blinding of Gloucester [in *King Lear*], where the perpetrators must be hated, one can see how important such a detail can be. The blinding of Gloucester is not so wicked an act, in itself, as murder. If we had seen, say, a properly motivated Goneril come in from offstage wringing her hands and crying, "Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more' [cf. *Macbeth*, II. ii. 32]. Goneril does put out the
eyes of sleep... I am afraid to think what I have done,” and on thus for nearly a full scene, our reaction to the whole episode would, needless to say, be exactly contrary to what it now is.

A second precaution is the highly general portrayal of Duncan before his murder. It is necessary only that he be known as a "good king," the murder of whom will be a wicked act. He must be the type of benevolent monarch. But more particular characteristics are carefully kept from him. There is nothing for us to love, nothing for us to "want further existence for," within the play. We hear of his goodness; we do not see it. We know practically no details about him, and we have little, if any, personal interest in him at the time of his death. All the personal interest is reserved for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. So, again, the wickedness is played up in the narration but played down in the representation. We must identify Macbeth with the murder of a blameless king, but only intellectually; emotionally we should be concerned as far as is possible only with the effects on Macbeth. We know that he has done the deed, but we feel primarily only his own suffering.

Banquo is considerably more "particularized" than was Duncan. Not only is he also a good man, but we have seen him acting as a good man, and we know quite a lot about him. We saw his reaction to the witches, and we know that he has resisted temptations similar to those of Macbeth. We have seen him in conversation with Macbeth. We have heard him in soliloquy. We know him to be very much like Macbeth, both in valor and in being the subject of prophecy. He thus has our lively sympathy; his death is a personal, rather than a general, loss. Perhaps more important, his murder is actually shown on the stage. His dying words are spoken in our presence, and they are unselfishly directed to saving his son. We are forced to the proper, though illogical, inference: it is more wicked to kill Banquo than to have killed Duncan.

But we must still not lose our sympathy for Macbeth. This is partially provided for by the fact that the deed is much more necessary than the previous murder; Banquo is a real political danger. But the important thing is again the choice of what is represented. The murder is done by accomplices, so that Macbeth is never shown in any real act of wickedness. When we see him, he is suffering the torments of the banquet table. Our incorrect emotional inference: the self-torture has already expiated the guilt of the crime.

The same devices work in the murder of Lady Macduff and her children, the third and last atrocity explicitly shown in the play (except for the killing of young Siward, which, being military, is hardly an atrocity in this sense). Lady Macduff is more vividly portrayed even than Banquo, although she appears on the stage for a much briefer time. Her complaints against the absence of her husband, her loving banter with her son, and her stand against the murderers make her as admirable as the little boy himself, who dies in defense of his father's name. The murder of women and children of such quality is wicked indeed, the audience is made to feel. And when we move to England and see the effect of the atrocity on Macduff, our active pity for Macbeth's victims is at the high point of the play. For the first time, perhaps, pity for Macbeth's victims really wars with pity for him, and our desire for his downfall, to protect others and to protect himself from his own further misdeeds, begins to mount in consequence.

Yet even here Macbeth is kept as little "to blame" as possible. He does not do the deed himself, and we can believe that he would have been unable to, had he seen the wife and child as we have seen them. . . . He is much further removed from them than from his other victims: as far as we know, he has never seen them. They are as remote and impersonal to him as they are immediate and personal to the audience, and personal blame against him is thus attenuated. More important, however, immediately after Macduff's tears we shift to Lady Macbeth's scene—the effect being again to impress on us the fact that the punishment for these crimes is always as great as, or greater than, the crimes themselves. Thus all three crimes are followed immediately by scenes of suffering and self-torture. Shakespeare works almost as if he were following a master-rulebook: By your choice of what to represent from the materials provided in your story, insure that each step in your protagonist's degeneration will be counteracted by mounting pity for him.
All this would certainly suffice to keep Macbeth at the center of our interest and sympathy, even with all our mounting concern for his victims. But it is reinforced by qualities in his character separate and distinct from his moral qualities. Perhaps the most important of these is his gift... of expressing himself in great poetry. We naturally tend to feel with the character who speaks the best poetry of the play, no matter what his deeds (Iago would never be misplayed as protagonist if his poetry did not rival, and sometimes surpass, Othello's). When we add to this poetic gift an extremely rich and concrete set of characteristics, over and above his moral qualities, we have a character which is in its own way more sympathetic than any character portrayed in only moral colors could be. Even the powers of virtue gathering about his castle to destroy him seem petty compared with his mammoth sensitivity, his rich despair. When he says:

my way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf:
And that which should accompany old age.
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends.
I must not look to have.
[V. iii. 22-6]

we feel that he wants these things quite as honestly and a good deal more passionately than even the most virtuous man could want them. And we regret deeply the truth of his conclusion that he "must not look to have" them.

III
If Macbeth's initial nobility, the manner of representation of his atrocities, and his rich poetic gift are all calculated to create and sustain our sympathy for him throughout his movement toward destruction, the kind of mistake he makes in initiating his own destruction is equally well calculated to heighten our willingness to forgive while deploring. On one level it could, of course, be said that he errs simply in being overambitious and underscrupulous. But this is only partly true. What allows him to sacrifice his moral beliefs to his ambition is a mistake of another kind—of a kind which is, at least to modern spectators, more probable or credible than any conventional tragic flaw or any traditional tragic error such as mistaking the identity of a brother or not knowing that one's wife is ones mother. Macbeth knows what he is doing, yet he does not know. He knows the immorality of the act, but he has no conception of the effects of the act on himself or on his surroundings. Accustomed to murder of a "moral" sort, in battle, and having valorously and successfully "carv'd out his passage" with "bloody execution" [I. ii. 18-19] many times previously, he misunderstands completely what will be the devastating effect on his own character if he tries to carve out his passage in civil life. The murder of Duncan on one level resembles closely the kind of thing Macbeth has done professionally, and he lacks the insight to see the great difference between the two kinds of murder. He cannot foresee that success in the first murder will only lead to the speech "to be thus is nothing; But to be safely thus" [III. i. 47-8], and to ever increasing degradation and suffering for himself and for those around him. Even though he has a kind of double premonition of the effects of the deed both on his own conscience and on Duncan's subjects ("If it were done when 't is done, then 't were well..." [I. vii. lff.]), he does not really understand. If he did understand, he could not do the deed.

This ignorance is made more convincing by being extended to a misunderstanding of the forces leading him to the murder. Macbeth does not really understand that he has two spurs "to prick the sides" of his intent [I. vii. 26], besides his own vaulting ambition. The first of these is, of course, the witches and their prophecy. A good deal of nonsense has been written about these witches, some in the direction of making them totally responsible for the action of Macbeth and some making them merely a fantastical representation of Macbeth's mental state. Yet they are quite clearly real and objective, since they say and do things which Macbeth could know nothing about—such as their presentation of the ambiguous facts of Macduff's birth and the Birnam wood trick. And equally they are not "fate," alone responsible for what happens to Macbeth. He deliberately chooses from what they have to say only those things which he wishes to hear; and he has already felt the
ambition to be king and even possibly to become king through regicide. Dramatically they seem to be here both as a needed additional goad to his ambition and as a concrete instance of Macbeth's tragic misunderstanding. His deliberate and consistent mistaking of what they have to say objectifies for us his misunderstanding of everything about his situation. He should realize that, if they are true oracles, both parts of their prophecy must be fulfilled. He makes the mistake of acting criminally to bring about the first part of the prophecy, and then acting criminally to prevent the fulfilment of the second part, concerning Banquo. But only if they were not true oracles would the slaying of Duncan be necessary or the slaying of Banquo be of any use. Macbeth tries to pick and choose from their promises, and they thus aid him in his self-destruction.

The second force which Macbeth does not understand, and without which he would find himself incapable of the murder, is Lady Macbeth. She, of course, fills several functions in the play, besides her inherent interest as a character, which is great indeed. But her chief function, as the textbook commonplace quite rightly has it, is to incite Macbeth to the murder of Duncan. Shakespeare has realized the best possible form for this incitation. She does not urge Macbeth with pictures of the pleasures of rewarded ambition; she does not allow his thoughts to remain on the moral aspects of the problem, as they would if he were left to himself. Rather, she shifts the whole ground of the consideration to questions of Macbeth's valor. She twits him for cowardice, plays upon the word "man," making it seem that he becomes more a man by doing the manly deed. She exaggerates her own courage (although significantly she does not offer to do the murder herself), to make him fear to seem cowardly by comparison. Macbeth's whole reputation for bravery seems at last to be at stake, and even questions of success and failure are made to hang on his courage: "But screw your courage to the sticking-place / And we'll not fail" [I. vii. 60-1]. So that the whole of his past achievement seems to depend for its meaning on his capacity to go ahead with the contemplated act. He performs the act, and from that point his final destruction is certain.

His tragic error, then, is at least three-fold: he does not understand the forces working upon him to make him commit the deed, neither his wife nor the weird sisters; he does not understand the differences between "bloody execution" in civilian life and in his past military life; and he does not understand his own character—he does not know what will be the effects of the evil act on his own future happiness. Only one of these—the misunderstanding of the witches' prophecy—can be considered similar to, say, Iphigenia's ignorance of her brother's identity [in Euripides's Iphigenia in Tauris]. Shakespeare has realized that simple ignorance of that sort will not do for the richly complex degenerative plot. The hero here must be really aware of the wickedness of his act, in advance. The more aware he can be—and still commit the act convincingly—the greater the regret felt by the reader or spectator. Being thus aware, he must act under a special kind of misunderstanding: it must be a misunderstanding caused by such powerful forces that even a good man might credibly be deceived by them into "knowingly" performing an atrocious deed.

All these points are illustrated powerfully in the contrast between the final words of Malcolm concerning Macbeth—"This dead butcher and his fiendlike queen" [V. ix. 35]—and the spectator's own feelings toward Macbeth at the same point. One judges Macbeth, as Shakespeare intends, not merely for his wicked acts but in the light of the total impression of all the incidents of the play. Malcolm and Macduff do not know Macbeth and the forces that have worked on him; the spectator does know him and, knowing him, can feel great pity that a man with so much potentiality for greatness should have fallen so low. The pity is that everything was not otherwise, since it so easily could have been otherwise. Macbeth's whole life, from the time of the first visitation of the witches, is felt to be itself a tragic error, one big pitiful mistake. And the conclusion brings a flood of relief that the awful blunder has played itself out, that Macbeth has at last been able to die, still valiant, and is forced no longer to go on enduring the knowledge of the consequences of his own misdeeds. (pp. 18-25)

Mary McCarthy

He is a general and has just won a battle; he enters the scene making a remark about the weather. "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" [I. iii. 38]. On this flat note Macbeth's character tone is set. "Terrible weather we're having." "The sun can't seem to make up its mind." "Is it hot/cold/wet enough for you?" A commonplace man who talks in commonplaces, a golfer, one might guess, on the Scottish fairways, Macbeth is the only Shakespeare hero who corresponds to a bourgeois type: a murderous Babbitt [in Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt], let us say.

You might argue just the opposite, that Macbeth is over-imaginative, the prey of visions. It is true that he is impressionable. Banquo, when they come upon the witches, amuses himself at their expense, like a man of parts idly chaffing a fortuneteller. Macbeth, though, is deeply impressed. "Thane of Cawdor and King." He thinks this over aloud. "How can I be Thane of Cawdor when the Thane of Cawdor is alive?" [cf. I. iii. 72-5] When this mental stumbling-block has been cleared away for him (the Thane of Cawdor has received a death sentence), he turns his thoughts sotto voce [under his breath] to the next question. "How can I be King when Duncan is alive?" The answer comes back, "Kill him" [cf. I. iii. 137-42]. It does fleetingly occur to Macbeth, as it would to most people, to leave matters alone and let destiny work it out. "If chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me, Without my stir" [I. iii. 143-44]. But this goes against his grain. A reflective man might wonder how fate would spin her plot, as the Virgin Mary must have wondered after the Angel Gabriel's visit. But Macbeth does not trust to fate, that is, to the unknown, the mystery of things; he trusts only to a known quantity—himself—to put the prophecy into action. In short, he has no faith, which requires imagination. He is literal-minded; that, in a word, is his tragedy.

It was not his idea, he could plead in self-defense, but the witches', that he should have the throne. They said it first. But the witches only voiced a thought that was already in his mind; after all, he was Duncan's cousin and close to the crown. And once the thought has been put into words, he is in a scrambling hurry. He cannot wait to get home to tell his wife about the promise; in his excitement, he puts it in a letter, which he sends on ahead, like a businessman briefing an associate on a piece of good news for the firm.

Lady Macbeth takes very little stock in the witches. She never pesters her husband, as most wives would, with questions about the Weird Sisters: "What did they say, exactly?" "How did they look?" "Are you sure?" She is less interested in "fate and metaphysical aid" [I. v. 29] than in the business at hand—how to nerve her husband to do what he wants to do. And later, when Macbeth announces that he is going out to consult the Weird Sisters again, she refrains from comment. As though she were keeping her opinion—"O proper stuff!" [III. iv. 59]—to herself. Lady Macbeth is not superstitious. Macbeth is. This makes her repeatedly impatient with him, for Macbeth, like many men of his sort, is an old story to his wife. A tale full of sound and fury signifying nothing. Her contempt for him perhaps extends even to his ambition. "Wouldst not play false, And yet wouldst wrongly win" [I. v. 21-2]. As though to say, "All right, if that's what you want, have the courage to get it." Lady Macbeth does not so much give the impression of coveting the crown herself as of being weary of watching Macbeth covet it. Macbeth, by the way, is her second husband, and either her first husband was a better man than he, which galls her, or he was just another general, another superstitious golfer, which would gall her too.

Superstition here is the opposite of reason on the one hand and of imagination on the other. Macbeth is credulous, in contrast to Lady Macbeth, to Banquo, and, later, to Malcolm, who sets the audience an example of the right way by mistrusting Macduff until he has submitted him to an empirical test. Believing and knowing are paired in Malcolm's mind; what he knows he believes. Macbeth's eagerness to believe is the companion of his lack of faith. If all works out right for him in this world, Macbeth says, he can take a chance on the next ("We'd jump the life to come" [I. vii. 7]). Superstition whispers when true religion has been silenced, and Macbeth becomes a ready client for the patent medicines brewed by the jeering witches on the heath.
As in his first interview with them he is too quick to act literally on a dark saying, in the second he is too easily reassured. He will not be conquered till "great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him." "Why, that can never happen!" [cf. IV. i. 92-4] he cries out in immediate relief, his brow clearing. It never enters his mind to examine the saying more closely, test it, so to speak, for a double bottom, as was common in those days (Banquo even points this out to him) with prophetic utterances which were known, to be ambiguous and tricky. Any child knew that a prophecy often meant the reverse of what it seemed to say, and any man of imagination would ask himself how Birnam Wood might come to Dunsinane and take measures to prevent it, as King Laius took measures to prevent his own death by arranging to have the baby Oedipus killed [in Sophocles's Oedipus Rex]. If Macbeth had thought it out, he could have had Birnam Wood chopped down and burned on the spot and the ashes dumped into the sea. True, the prophecy might still have turned against him.... but that would have been another story, another tragedy, the tragedy of a clever man not clever enough to circumvent fate. Macbeth is not clever; he is taken in by surfaces, by appearance. He cannot think beyond the usual course of things. "None of woman born" [IV. i. 80]. All men, he says to himself, sagely, are born of women; Malcolm and Macduff are men; therefore I am safe. This logic leaves out of account the extraordinary: the man brought into the world by Caesarean section. In the same way, it leaves out of account the supernatural—the very forces he is trafficking with. He might be overcome by an angel or a demon, as well as by Macduff.

Yet this pedestrian general sees ghosts and imaginary daggers in the air. Lady Macbeth does not, and the tendency in her husband grates on her nerves; she is sick of his terrors and fancies. A practical woman, Lady Macbeth, more a partner than a wife, though Macbeth treats her with a trite domestic fondness—"Love," "Dearest love," "Dearest chuck," "Sweet remembrancer." These middle-aged, middle-class endearments, as though he called her "Honeybunch" or "Sweetheart," as well as the obligatory "Dear," are a master stroke of Shakespeare's and perfectly in keeping with the prosing about the weather, the heavy credulousness. Naturally Macbeth is dominated by his wife. He is old Iron Pants in the field (as she bitterly reminds him), but at home she has to wear the pants; she has to unsex herself. No "chucks" or "dearests" escape her tightened lips, and yet she is more feeling, more human finally than Macbeth. She thinks of her father when she sees the old King asleep, and this natural thought will not let her kill him. Macbeth has to do it, just as the quailing husband of any modern virago is sent down to the basement to kill a rat or drown a set of kittens. An image of her father, irrelevant to her purpose, softens this monster woman; sleepwalking, she thinks of Lady Macduff. "The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?" [cf. IV. i. 150-53]. Stronger than Macbeth, less suggestible, she is nevertheless imaginative, where he is not. She does not see ghosts and daggers; when she sleepwalks, it is simple reality that haunts her—the crime relived. "Yet, who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" [V. i. 39-40]. Over and over, the epiphenomena of the crime present themselves to her dormant consciousness. This nightly reliving is not penitence but more terrible—remorse, the agenbite of the restless deed. Lady Macbeth's uncontrollable imagination drives her to put herself in the place of others—the wife of the Thane of Fife—and to recognize a kinship between all human kind: the pathos of old age in Duncan has made her think, "Why, he might be my father!" This sense of a natural bond between men opens her to contrition—sorrowing with. To ask whether, waking, she is "sorry" for what she has done is impertinent. She lives with it and it kills her.

Macbeth has no feeling for others, except envy, a common middle-class trait. He envies the murdered Duncan his rest, which is a strange way of looking at your victim. What he suffers on his own account after the crimes is simple panic. He is never contrite or remorseful; it is not the deed but a shadow of it, Banquo's spook, that appears to him. The "scruples" that agitate him before Duncan's murder are mere echoes of conventional opinion, of what might be said about his deed: that Duncan was his king, his cousin, and a guest under his roof. "I have bought golden opinions," he says to himself (note the verb), "from all sorts of people" [I. vii. 32-3]; now these people may ask for their opinions back—a refund—if they suspect him of the murder. It is like a business firm's being reluctant to part with its "good will." The fact that Duncan was such a good king
bothers him, and why? Because there will be universal grief at his death. But his chief "scruple" is even simpler. "If we should fail?" he says timidly to Lady Macbeth [I. vii. 59]. Sweet chuck tells him that they will not. Yet once she has ceased to be effectual as a partner, Dearest love is an embarrassment. He has no time for her vapors. "Cure her of that" [V. iii. 39], he orders the doctor on hearing that she is troubled by "fancies." Again the general is speaking.

The idea of Macbeth as a conscience-tormented man is a platitude as false as Macbeth himself. Macbeth has no conscience. His main concern throughout the play is that most selfish of all concerns: to get a good night's sleep. His invocation to sleep, while heartfelt, is perfectly conventional; sleep builds you up, enables you to start the day fresh. Thus the virtue of having a good conscience is seen by him in terms of bodily hygiene. Lady Macbeth shares these preoccupations. When he tells her he is going to see the witches, she remarks that he needs sleep.

Her wifey concern is mechanical and far from real solicitude. She is aware of Macbeth; she knows him (he does not know her at all, apparently), but she regards him coldly as a thing, a tool that must be oiled and polished. His soul-states do not interest her; her attention is narrowed on his morale, his public conduct, the shifting expressions of his face. But in a sense she is right, for there is nothing to Macbeth but fear and ambition, both of which he tries to hide, except from her. This naturally gives her a poor opinion of the inner man.

Why is it, though, that Lady Macbeth seems to us a monster while Macbeth does not? Partly because she is a woman and has "unsexed" herself, which makes her a monster by definition. Also because the very prospect of murder quickens an hysterical excitement in her, like the discovery of some object in a shop—a set of emeralds or a sable stole—which Macbeth can give her and which will be an "outlet" for all the repressed desires he cannot satisfy. She behaves as though Macbeth, through his weakness, will deprive her of self-realization; the unimpeded exercise of her will is the voluptuous end she seeks. That is why she makes naught of scruples, as inner brakes on her throbbing engines. Unlike Macbeth, she does not pretend to harbor a conscience, though this, on her part, by a curious turn, is a pretense, as the sleepwalking scene reveals. After the first crime, her will subsides, spent; the devil has brought her to climax and left her.

Macbeth is not a monster, like Richard III or Iago or Iachimo [in Cymbeline], though in the catalogue he might go for one because of the blackness of his deeds. But at the outset his deeds are only the wishes and fears of the average, undistinguished man translated into halfhearted action. Pure evil is a kind of transcendence that he does not aspire to. He only wants to be king and sleep the sleep of the just, undisturbed. He could never have been a good man, even if he had not met the witches; hence we cannot see him as a devil incarnate, for the devil is a fallen angel. Macbeth does not fall; if anything, he somewhat improves as the result of his career of crime. He throws off his dependency and thus achieves the "greatness" he mistakenly sought in the crown and scepter. He swells to vast proportions, having supped full with horrors.

The isolation of Macbeth, which is at once a punishment and a tragic dignity or honor, takes place by stages and by deliberate choice; it begins when he does not tell Lady Macbeth that he has decided to kill Banquo and reaches its peak at Dunsinane, in the final action. Up to this time, though he has cut himself off from all human contacts, he is counting on the witches as allies. When he first hears the news that Macduff is not "of woman born" [V. viii. 12-15], he is unmanned; everything he trusted (the literal word) has betrayed him, and he screams in terror, "I'll not fight with thee!" [V. viii. 22]. But Macduff's taunts make a hero of him; he cannot die like this, shamed. His death is his first true act of courage, though even here he has had to be pricked to it by mockery, Lady Macbeth's old spur. Nevertheless, weaned by his very crimes from a need for reassurance, nursed in a tyrant's solitude, he meets death on his own, without metaphysical aid. "Lay on, Macduff" [V. viii. 33].
What is modern and bourgeois in Macbeth's character is his wholly social outlook. He has no feeling for others, and yet until the end he is a vicarious creature, existing in his own eyes through what others may say of him, through what they tell him or promise him. This paradox is typical of the social being—at once a wolf out for himself and a sheep. Macbeth, moreover, is an expert buck-pass; he sees how others can be used. It is he, not Lady Macbeth, who thinks of smearing the drunken chamberlains with blood (though it is she, in the end, who carries it out), so that they shall be caught "red-handed" the next morning when Duncan's murder is discovered. At this idea he brightens; suddenly, he sees his way clear. It is the moment when at last he decides. The eternal executive, ready to fix responsibility on a subordinate, has seen the deed finally take a recognizable form. Now he can do it. And the crackerjack thought of killing the grooms afterward (dead men tell no tales—old adage) is again purely his own on-the-spot inspiration; no credit to Lady Macbeth.

It is the sort of thought that would have come to Hamlet's Uncle Claudius, another trepidant executive. Indeed, Macbeth is more like Claudius than like any other character in Shakespeare. Both are doting husbands; both rose to power by betraying their superior's trust; both are easily frightened and have difficulty saying their prayers. Macbeth's "Amen" sticks in his throat, he complains, and Claudius, on his knees, sighs that he cannot make what priests call a "good act of contrition." The desire to say his prayers like any pew-holder, quite regardless of his horrible crime, is merely a longing for respectability. Macbeth "repents" killing the grooms, but this is for public consumption. "O, yet I do repent me of my fury, That I did kill them" [II. iii. 106-07]. In fact, it is the one deed he does not repent (i.e., doubt the wisdom of) either before or after. This hypocritical self-accusation, which is his sidelong way of announcing the embarrassing fact that he has just done away with the grooms, and his simulated grief at Duncan's murder ("All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead, The wine of life is drawn" [II. iii. 94-5], etc.) are his basest moments in the play, as well as his boldest; here is nearly a magnificent monster.

The dramatic effect too is one of great boldness on Shakespeare's part. Macbeth is speaking pure Shakespearean poetry, but in his mouth, since we know he is lying, it turns into facile verse, Shakespearean poetry buskined. The same with "Here lay Duncan, His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood..." [II. iii. 111-12]. If the image were given to Macduff, it would be uncontaminated poetry; from Macbeth it is "proper stuff"—fustian. This opens the perilous question of sincerity in the arts; is a line of verse altered for us by the sincerity of the one who speaks it? In short, is poetry relative to the circumstances or absolute? Or, more particularly, are Macbeth's soliloquies poetry, which they sound like, or something else? Did Shakespeare intend to make Macbeth a poet, like Hamlet, Lear, and Othello? In that case, how can Macbeth be an unimaginative mediocrity? My opinion is that Macbeth's soliloquies are not poetry but rhetoric. They are tirades. That is, they do not trace any pensive motion of the soul or heart but are a volley of words discharged. Macbeth is neither thinking nor feeling aloud: he is declaiming. Like so many unfeeling men, he has a facile emotionalism, which he turns on and off. Not that his fear is insincere, but his loss of control provides him with an excuse for histrionics.

These gibberings exasperate Lady Macbeth. "What do you mean?" [II. ii. 37] she says coldly after she has listened to a short harangue on "Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more!'" [II. ii. 32]. It is an allowable question—what does he mean? And his funeral oration on her, if she could have heard it, would have brought her back to life to protest. "She should have died hereafter" [V. v. 17]—fine, that was the real Macbeth. But then, as if conscious of the proprieties, he at once begins on a series of bromides ("Tomorrow, and tomorrow..." [V. v. 19ff.]) that he seems to have had ready to hand for the occasion like a black mourning suit. All Macbeth's soliloquies have that ready-to-hand, if not hand-me-down, air, which is perhaps why they are given to school children to memorize, often with the result of making them hate Shakespeare. What children resent in these soliloquies is precisely their sententiousness—the sound they have of being already memorized from a copybook. (pp. 3-12)

The play between poetry and rhetoric, the conversion of poetry to declamation, is subtle and horrible in Macbeth. The sincere pent-up poet in Macbeth flashes out not in the soliloquies but when he howls at a
servant. "The Devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon! Where got'st thou that goose look?" [V. iii. 11]. Elsewhere, the general's tropes are the gold braid of his dress uniform or the chasing of his armor. If an explanation is needed, you might say he learned to use words through long practice in haranguing his troops, whipping them and himself into battle frenzy. Up to recent times a fighting general, like a football coach, was an orator.

But it must be noted that it is not only Macbeth who rants. Nor is it only Macbeth who talks about the weather. The play is stormy with atmosphere—the screaming and shrieking of owls, the howling of winds. Nature herself is ranting, like the witches, and Night, black Hecate, is queen of the scene. Bats are flitting about; ravens and crows are hoarse; the house-martins' nests on the battlements of Macbeth's castle give a misleading promise of peace and gentle domesticity. "It will be rain tonight," says Banquo simply, looking at the sky (note the difference between this and Macbeth's pompous generality), and the First Murderer growls at him, striking, "Let it come down" [III. iii. 16]. The disorder of Nature, as so often in Shakespeare, presages and reflects the disorder of the body politic. Guilty Macbeth cannot sleep, but the night of Duncan's murder, the whole house, as if guilty too, is restless; Malcolm and Donalbain talk and laugh in their sleep; the drunken porter, roused, plays that he is gatekeeper of hell.

Indeed, the whole action takes place in a kind of hell and is pitched to the demons' shriek of hyperbole. This would appear to be a peculiar setting for a study of the commonplace. But only at first sight. The fact that an ordinary philistine like Macbeth goes on the rampage and commits a series of murders is a sign that human nature, like Nature, is capable of any mischief if left to its "natural" self. The witches, unnatural beings, are Nature spirits, stirring their snake-filet and owl's wing, newt's eye and frog toe in a camp stew: earthy ingredients boil down to an unearthly broth. It is the same with the man Macbeth. Ordinary ambition, fear, and a kind of stupidity make a deadly combination. Macbeth, a self-made king, is not kingly, but just another Adam or Fall guy, with Eve at his elbow.

There is no play of Shakespeare's (I think) that contains the words "Nature" and "natural" so many times, and the "Nature" within the same speech can mean first something good and then something evil, as though it were a pun. Nature is two-sided, double-talking, like the witches. "Fair is foul and foul is fair," they cry [I. i. 11], and Macbeth enters the play unconsciously echoing them, for he is never original but chock-full of the "milk of human kindness" [I. v. 17], which does not mean kindness in the modern sense but simply human "nature," human kind. The play is about Nature, and its blind echo, human nature.

Macbeth, in short, shows life in the cave. Without religion, animism rules the outer world, and without faith, the human soul is beset by hobgoblins. This at any rate was Shakespeare's opinion, to which modern history, with the return of the irrational in the Fascist nightmare and its fear of new specters in the form of Communism, Socialism, etc., lends support. It is a troubling thought that bloodstained Macbeth, of all Shakespeare's characters, should seem the most "modern," the only one you could transpose into contemporary battle dress or a sport shirt and slacks. (pp. 12-14)


**Criticism: Lady Macbeth**

Maternal power in *Macbeth* is not embodied in the figure of a particular mother (as it is, for example, in *Coriolanus*); it is instead diffused throughout the play, evoked primarily by the figures of the witches and Lady Macbeth. Largely through Macbeth's relationship to them, the play becomes (like *Coriolanus*) a representation of primitive fears about male identity and autonomy itself, about those looming female presences who threaten to control one's actions and one's mind, to constitute one's very self, even at a
The witches constitute our introduction to the realm of maternal malevolence unleashed by the loss of paternal protection; as soon as Macbeth meets them, he becomes... their "wayward son" [III. v. 11]. This maternal malevolence is given its most horrifying expression in Shakespeare in the image through which Lady Macbeth secures her control over Macbeth:

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.
[I. vii. 54-9]

This image of murderously disrupted nurturance is the psychic equivalence of the witches' poisonous cauldron; both function to subject Macbeth's will to female forces. For the play strikingly constructs the fantasy of subjection to maternal malevolence in two parts, in the witches and in Lady Macbeth, and then persistently identifies the two parts as one. Through this identification, Shakespeare in effect locates the source of his culture's fear of witchcraft in individual human history, in the infant's long dependence on female figures felt as all-powerful: what the witches suggest about the vulnerability of men to female power on the cosmic plane, Lady Macbeth doubles on the psychological plane.

Lady Macbeth's power as a female temptress allies her in a general way with the witches as soon as we see her. The specifics of that implied alliance begin to emerge as she attempts to harden herself in preparation for hardening her husband: the disturbance of gender that Banquo registers when he first meets the witches is played out in psychological terms in Lady Macbeth's attempt to unsex herself. Calling on spirits ambiguously allied with the witches themselves, she phrases this unsexing as the undoing of her own bodily maternal function:

Come, you Spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here.
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, topfull
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse;
That no compunctious visitings of Nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers.
[I. v. 40-8]

In the play's context of unnatural births, the thickening of the blood and the stopping up of access and passage to remorse begin to sound like attempts to undo reproductive functioning and perhaps to stop the menstrual blood that is the sign of its potential. The metaphors in which Lady Macbeth frames the stopping up of remorse, that is, suggest that she imagines an attack on the reproductive passages of her own body, on what makes her specifically female. And as she invites the spirits to her breasts, she reiterates the centrality of the attack specifically on maternal function: needing to undo the "milk of human kindness" [I. v. 17] in Macbeth, she imagines an attack on her own literal milk, its transformation into gall. This imagery locates the horror of the scene in Lady Macbeth's unnatural abrogation of her maternal function. But latent within this image of unsexing is the horror of the maternal function itself. Most modern editors follow [Samuel] Johnson in glossing "take my milk for gall" as "take my milk in exchange for gall," imagining in effect that the spirits
empty out the natural maternal fluid and replace it with the unnatural and poisonous, one. But perhaps Lady Macbeth is asking the spirits to take her milk as gall, to nurse from her breast and find in her milk their sustaining poison. Here the milk itself is the gall; no transformation is necessary. In these lines Lady Macbeth focuses the culture's fear of maternal nursery—a fear reflected, for example, in the common worries about the various ills (including female blood itself) that could be transmitted through nursing and in the sometime identification of colostrum as witch's milk. Insofar as her milk itself nurtures the evil spirits, Lady Macbeth localizes the image of maternal danger, inviting the identification of her maternal function itself with that of the witch. For she here invites precisely that nursing of devil-imps so central to the current understanding of witchcraft that the presence of supernumerary teats alone was often taken as sufficient evidence that one was a witch. Lady Macbeth and the witches fuse at this moment, and they fuse through the image of perverse nursery.

It is characteristic of the play's division of labor between Lady Macbeth and the witches that she; rather than they, is given the imagery of perverse nursery traditionally attributed to the witches. The often noted alliance between Lady Macbeth and the witches constructs malignant female power both in the cosmos and in the family; it in effect adds the whole weight of the spiritual order to the condemnation of Lady Macbeth's insurrection. But despite the superior cosmic status of the witches, Lady Macbeth seems to me finally the more frightening figure. For Shakespeare's witches are an odd mixture of the terrifying and the near comic. Even without consideration of the Hecate scene [III. v] with its distinct lightening of tone and its incipient comedy of discord among the witches, we may begin to feel a shift toward the comic in the presentation of the witches: the specificity and predictability of the ingredients in their dire recipe pass over toward grotesque comedy even while they create a (partly pleasurable) shiver of horror. There is a distinct weakening of their power after their first appearances: only halfway through the play, in [IV. i], do we hear that they themselves have masters [IV. i. 63]. The more Macbeth claims for them, the less their actual power seems: by the time Macbeth evokes the cosmic damage they can wreak [IV. i. 50-61], we have already felt the presence of such damage, and felt it moreover not as issuing from the witches but as a divinely sanctioned nature's expressions of outrage at the disruption of patriarchal order. The witches' displays of thunder and lightning, like their apparitions, are mere theatrics compared to what we have already heard; and the serious disruptions of natural order—the storm that toppled the chimneys and made the earth shake [II. iii. 54-61], the unnatural darkness in day [II. iv. 5-10], the cannibalism of Duncan's horses [II. iv. 14-18]—seem the horrifying but reassuringly familiar signs of God's displeasure, firmly under His—not their—control. Partly because their power is thus circumscribed, nothing the witches say or do conveys the presence of awesome and unexplained malevolence in the way that Lear's storm does. Even the process of dramatic representation itself may diminish their power: embodied, perhaps, they lack full power to terrify: "Present fears"—even of witches—"are less than horrible imaginings" [I. iii. 137-38]. They tend thus to become as much containers for as expressions of nightmare; to a certain extent, they help to exorcise the terror of female malevolence by localizing it. (pp. 96-9)

Lady Macbeth brings the witches' power home: they get the cosmic apparatus, she gets the psychic force. That Lady Macbeth is the more frightening figure—and was so, I suspect, even before belief in witchcraft had declined—suggests the firmly domestic and psychological basis of Shakespeare's imagination.

The fears of female coercion, female definition of the male, that are initially located cosmically in the witches thus find their ultimate locus in the figure of Lady Macbeth, whose attack on Macbeth's virility is the source of her strength over him and who acquires that strength, I shall argue, partly because she can make him imagine himself as an infant vulnerable to her. In the figure of Lady Macbeth, that is, Shakespeare rephrases the power of the witches as the wife/mother's power to poison human relatedness at its source: in her, their power of cosmic coercion is rewritten as the power of the mother to misshape or destroy the child. The attack on infants and on the genitals characteristic of Continental witchcraft belief is thus in her returned to its psychological source: in the play these beliefs are localized not in the witches but in the great central scene in which Lady Macbeth persuades Macbeth to the murder of Duncan. In this scene, Lady Macbeth notoriously
makes the murder of Duncan the test of Macbeth's virility; if he cannot perform the murder, he is in effect reduced to the helplessness of an infant subject to her rage. She begins by attacking his manhood, making her love for him contingent on the murder that she identifies as equivalent to his male potency: "From this time / Such I account thy love" [I. vii. 38-9]; "When you durst do it, then you were a man" [I. vii. 49]. Insofar as his drunk hope is now "green and pale" [I. vii. 37], he is identified as emasculated, exhibiting the symptoms not only of hangover, but also of the green-sickness, the typical disease of timid young virgin women. Lady Macbeth's argument is, in effect, that any signs of the "milk of human kindness" [I. v. 17] mark him as more womanly than she; she proceeds to enforce his masculinity by demonstrating her willingness to dry up that milk in herself, specifically by destroying her nursing infant in fantasy: "I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dash'd the brains out" [I. vii. 56-8]. That this image has no place in the plot, where the Macbeths are strikingly childless, gives some indication of the inner necessity through which it appears. For Lady Macbeth expresses here not only the hardness she imagines to be male, not only her willingness to unmake the most essential maternal relationship: she expresses also a deep fantasy of Macbeth's utter vulnerability to her. As she progresses from questioning Macbeth's masculinity to imagining herself dashing out the brains of her infant son, she articulates a fantasy in which to be less than a man is to become interchangeably a woman or a baby, terribly subject to the wife/mother's destructive rage.

By evoking this vulnerability, Lady Macbeth acquires a power over Macbeth more absolute than any the witches can achieve. The play's central fantasy of escape from woman seems to me to unfold from this moment; we can see its beginnings in Macbeth's response to Lady Macbeth's evocation of absolute maternal power, Macbeth first responds by questioning the possibility of failure ("If we should fail?" [I. vii. 59]). Lady Macbeth counters this fear by inviting Macbeth to share in her fantasy of omnipotent malevolence: "What cannot you and I perform upon / Th'unguarded Duncan?" [I. vii. 69-70]). The satiated and sleeping Duncan takes on the vulnerability that Lady Macbeth has just invoked in the image of the feeding, trusting infant: Macbeth releases himself from the image of this vulnerability by sharing in the murder of this innocent. In his elation at this transfer of vulnerability from himself to Duncan, Macbeth imagines Lady Macbeth the mother to infants sharing her hardness, born in effect without vulnerability; in effect, he imagines her as male and then reconstitutes himself as the invulnerable male child of such a mother:

Bring forth men-children only!
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males.
[I. vii. 72-4]

Through the double pun on mettle/metal and male/mail, Lady Macbeth herself becomes virtually male, composed of the hard metal of which the armored male is made. Her children would necessarily be men, composed of her male mettle, armored by her mettle, lacking the female inheritance from the mother that would make them vulnerable. The man-child thus brought forth would be no trusting infant; the very phrase men-children suggests the presence of the adult man even at birth, hence the undoing of childish vulnerability. The mobility of the imagery—from male infant with his brains dashed out to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth triumphing over the sleeping, trusting Duncan, to the all-male invulnerable man-child, suggests the logic of the fantasy: only the child of an all-male mother is safe. We see here the creation of a defensive fantasy of exemption from the woman's part: as infantile vulnerability is shifted to Duncan, Macbeth creates in himself the image of Lady Macbeth's hardened all-male man-child; in committing the murder, he thus becomes like Richard III, using the bloody axe to free himself in fantasy from the dominion of women, even while apparently carrying out their will. (pp. 100-03)

Criticism: Banquo

A. C. Bradley

The main interest of the character of Banquo arises from the changes that take place in him, and from the influence of the Witches upon him. And it is curious that Shakespeare's intention here is so frequently missed. Banquo being at first strongly contrasted with Macbeth, as an innocent man with a guilty, it seems to be supposed that this contrast must be continued to his death; while, in reality, though it is never removed, it is gradually diminished. Banquo in fact may be described much more truly than Macbeth as the victim of the Witches. If we follow this story this will be evident.

He bore a part only less distinguished than Macbeth's in the battles against Sweno and Macdonwaid. He and Macbeth are called 'our captains,' and when they meet the Witches they are traversing the 'blasted heath' alone together. Banquo accosts they will not, or must not, speak to him. To Macbeth's brief appeal, 'Speak, if you can: what are you?' [I. iii. 47] they at once reply, not by saying what they are, but by hailing him Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and King hereafter. Banquo is greatly surprised that his partner should start as if in fear, and observes that he is at once 'rapt'; and he bids the Witches, if they know the future, to prophesy to him, who neither begs their favour nor fears their hate. Macbeth, looking back at a later time, remembers Banquo's daring, and how

he chid the sisters,
When first they put the name of king upon me,
And bade them speak to him.

[III. i. 56-8]

'Chid' is an exaggeration; but Banquo is evidently a bold man, probably an ambitious one, and certainly has no lurking guilt in his ambition. On hearing the predictions concerning himself and his descendants he makes no answer, and when the Witches are about to vanish he shows none of Macbeth's feverish anxiety to know more. On their vanishing he is simply amazed, wonders if they were anything but hallucinations, makes no reference to the predictions till Macbeth mentions them, and then answers lightly.

When Ross and Angus, entering, announce to Macbeth that he has been made Thane of Cawdor, Banquo exclaims, aside, to himself or Macbeth, 'What! can the devil speak true?' [I. iii. 107]. He now believes that the Witches were real beings and the 'instruments of darkness.' When Macbeth, turning to him, whispers,

Do you not hope your children shall be kings,
When those that gave the Thane of Cawdor to me
Promised no less to them?

[I.iii. 118-20]

he draws with the boldness of innocence the inference which is really occupying Macbeth, and answers,

That, trusted home,
Might yet enkindle you unto the crown
Besides the thane of Cawdor.

[I. iii. 120-22]

Here he still speaks, I think, in a free, off-hand, even jesting, manner ('enkindle' meaning merely 'excite you to hope for'). But then, possibly from noticing something in Macbeth's face, he becomes graver, and goes on, with a significant 'but,'
But 'tis strange:
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.
[I. iii. 122-26]

He afterwards observes for the second time that his partner is 'rapt'; but he explains his abstraction naturally and sincerely by referring to the surprise of his new honours; and at the close of the scene, when Macbeth proposes that they shall discuss the predictions together at some later time, he answers in the cheerful, rather bluff manner, which he has used almost throughout, 'Very gladly.' Nor was there any reason why Macbeth's rejoinder, 'Till then, enough' [I. iii. 156], should excite misgivings in him, though it implied a request for silence, and though the whole behaviour of his partner during the scene must have looked very suspicious to him when the prediction of the crown was made good through the murder of Duncan.

In the next scene Macbeth and Banquo join the King, who welcomes them both with the kindest expressions of gratitude and with promises of favours to come. Macbeth has indeed already received a noble reward. Banquo, who is said by the King to have 'no less deserved' [I. iv. 30], receives as yet mere thanks. His brief and frank acknowledgment is contrasted with Macbeth's laboured rhetoric; and, as Macbeth goes out, Banquo turns with hearty praises of him to the King.

And when next we see him, approaching Macbeth's castle in company with Duncan, there is still no sign of change. Indeed he gains on us. It is he who speaks the beautiful lines,

This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,
By his loved mansionry, that the heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here: no jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle:
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observed,
The air is delicate;
[I. vi. 3-10]

—lines which tell of that freedom of heart, and that sympathetic sense of peace and beauty, which the Macbeth of the tragedy could never feel.

But now Banquo's sky begins to darken. At the opening of the Second Act we see him with Fleance crossing the court of the castle on his way to bed. The blackness of the moonless, starless night seems to oppress him. And he is oppressed by something else.

A heavy summons lies like lead upon me,
And yet I would not sleep: merciful powers,
Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature
Gives way to in repose!
[II. i. 6-9]

On Macbeth's entrance we know what Banquo means: he says to Macbeth—and it is the first time he refers to the subject unprovoked,
I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters.

[II. i. 20]

His will is still untouched: he would repel the 'cursed thoughts'; and they are mere thoughts, not intentions. But still they are 'thoughts,' something more, probably, than mere recollections; and they bring with them an undefined sense of guilt. The poison has begun to work.

The passage that follows Banquo's words to Macbeth is difficult to interpret:

I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters:
To you they have show'd some truth.

Macb. I think not of them:
Yet, when we can entreat an hour to serve,
We would spend it in some words upon that business,
If you would grant the time.

Ban. At your kind'st leisure.

Mach. If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis, It shall make honour for you.

Ban. So I lose none

[II. i. 20-30]

Macbeth's first idea is, apparently, simply to free himself from any suspicion which the discovery of the murder might suggest, by showing himself, just before it, quite indifferent to the predictions, and merely looking forward to a conversation about them at some future time. But why does he go on, 'If you shall cleave,' etc.? Perhaps he foresees that, on the discovery, Banquo cannot fail to suspect him, and thinks it safest to prepare the way at once for an understanding with him (in the original story he makes Banquo his accomplice before the murder). Banquo's answer shows three things,—that he fears a treasonable proposal, that he has no idea of accepting it, and that he has no fear of Macbeth to restrain him from showing what is in his mind.

Duncan is murdered. In the scene of discovery Banquo of course appears, and his behaviour is significant. When he enters, and Macduff cries out to him,

O Banquo, Banquo,
Our royal master's murdered,

and Lady Macbeth, who has entered a moment before, exclaims,

Woe, alas!
What, in our house?

his answer,

Too cruel anywhere,

[II. iii. 86-8]

shows, as I have pointed out, repulsion, and we may be pretty sure that he suspects the truth at once. After a few words to Macduff he remains absolutely silent while the scene is continued for nearly forty lines. He is watching Macbeth and listening as he tells how he put the chamberlains to death in a frenzy of loyal rage. At last Banquo appears to have made up his mind. On Lady Macbeth's faulting he proposes that they shall all retire, and that they shall afterwards meet,
And question this most bloody piece of work
To know it further. Fears and scruples shake us:
In the great hand of God I stand, and thence
Against the undivulged pretence I fight
Of treasonous malice.
[II. iii. 128-32]

His solemn language here reminds us of his grave words about 'the instruments of darkness' [I. iii. 124], and of his later prayer to the 'merciful powers'. He is profoundly shocked, full of indignation, and determined to play the part of a brave and honest man.

But he plays no such part. When next we see him, on the last day of his life, we find that he has yielded to evil. The Witches and his own ambition have conquered him. He alone of the lords knew of the prophecies, but he has said nothing of them. He has acquiesced in Macbeth's accession, and in the official theory that Duncan's sons had suborned the chamberlains to murder him. Doubtless, unlike Macduff, he was present at Scone to see the new king invested. He has, not formally but in effect, 'cloven to' Macbeth's 'consent'; he is knit to him by 'a most indissoluble tie' [III. i. 17]; his advice in council has been 'most grave and prosperous' [III. i. 21]; he is to be the 'chief guest' at that night's supper. And his soliloquy tells us why:

Thou hast it now: king, Cawdor, Glamis, all,
As the weird women promised, and, I fear,
Thou play'dst most foully fort: yet it was said
It should not stand in thy posterity,
But that myself should be the root and father
Of many kings. If there come truth from them—
As upon thee, Macbeth, their speeches shine—
Why, by the verities on thee made good.
May they not be my oracles as well,
And set me up in hope? But hush! no more.
[III. i. 1-10]

This 'hush! no more' is not the dismissal of 'cursed thoughts': it only means that he hears the trumpets announcing the entrance of the King and Queen.

His punishment comes swiftly, much more swiftly than Macbeth's, and saves him from any further fall. He is a very fearless man, and still so far honourable that he has no thought of acting to bring about the fulfilment of the prophecy which has beguiled him. And therefore he has no fear of Macbeth. But he little understands him. To Macbeth's tormented mind Banquo's conduct appears highly suspicious. Why has this bold and circumspect man kept his secret and become his chief adviser? In order to make good his part of the predictions after Macbeth's own precedent. Banquo, he is sure, will suddenly and secretly attack him. It is not the far-off accession of Banquo's descendants that he fears; it is (so he tells himself) swift murder; not that the 'barren sceptre' will some day droop from his dying hand, but that it will be 'wrenched' away now. [III. i. 62]. So he kills Banquo. But the Banquo he kills is not the innocent soldier who met the Witches and daffed their prophecies aside, nor the man who prayed to be delivered from the temptation of his dreams. (pp. 379-86)


Leo Kirschbaum
If we consider Banquo as a dramatic function rather than as a character in the usual sense, we shall be able to avoid [A.C.] Bradley's erroneous and confusing misreading of him as another whom the witches' influence
finally debases *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Bradley, with his customary approach, tended to consider Banquo as a whole man, a psychologically valid being; he did not see that the playwright has so depicted the character that he will always be a dramaturgic foil to Macbeth.

As Banquo and Macbeth meet the witches in [I. iii], Banquo notes that Macbeth 'start[s]' and 'seem[s] to fear' the witches' [I. iii. 51] prophecies, that he 'seems rapt withal'; but by his bold words to them, Banquo indicates that he has a free soul, 'who neither beg nor fear / Your favors nor your hate' [II. iii. 60-1]. Again, when Ross calls Macbeth Thane of Cawdor, it is Banquo who once and for all clearly indicates to the audience the true nature of the witches: 'What, can the devil speak true?' [III. iii. 107]. Although Banquo suspects nothing of Macbeth's intentions, he does know the nature of man and of Satan:

> And oftentimes to win us to our harm,  
> The instruments of darkness tell us truths,  
> Win us with honest trifles, to betray's  
> In deepest consequence.  
> [III. iii. 123-26]

Hence, he already knows what Macbeth does not learn completely until the very end: he has immediately recognized the witches as cunning emissaries of the enemy of mankind. And it is significant that Macbeth immediately wants to win Banquo to his side: 'let us speak / Our free hearts each to other' [III. iii. 154-55]. *Free* means *open* as well as *innocent*. Banquo replies, 'Very gladly.' The ease of the answer indicates once more a truly free heart. So, already, Shakespeare's pattern is emerging; Macbeth, tempted by evil, feels a strong desire to negate the difference which Banquo stands for.

In [I. v]. Lady Macbeth prays (I mean this word literally) the 'murth'ring ministers' to unsex her. Begging the devil to deprive her of the ordinary human qualities of pity and remorse, she requests the 'dunnest smoke of hell' [I, v. 51] in which to commit the crime. It is meaningfully to Banquo in [I. vi] that Shakespeare gives the lines describing Inverness castle in semi-religious terms—'temple-haunting martlet', 'heaven's breath', 'pendent bed and procreant cradle' [I. vi. 4-8]. We are meant to feel deeply here the contrast between Banquo's vision and the devil-haunted castle of actuality. The next scene, [I. vii] shows us a Macbeth who almost seems to have felt the implications of those words of Banquo:

> [Duncan's] virtues  
> Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against  
> The deep damnation of his taking off;  
> And pity, like a naked new-born babe,  
> Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin, hors'd  
> Upon the sightless couriers of the air,  
> Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,  
> That tears shall drown the wind.  
> [I. vii. 18-2S]

But his devil-possessed lady wins him over. And note how tightly Shakespeare has woven his pattern of contrasts: In [I.v] Lady Macbeth prayed to Satan to turn her 'milk' into 'gall'. In [I. vi] Banquo referred to the evidence of a godly home, the 'procreant cradle'. In [I. vii] Macbeth speaks of 'pity, like a naked new-born babe' [I. vii. 21]. Later in [I. vii] Lady Macbeth says that she could snatch the smiling babe from her breast and dash its brains out!

At the beginning of Act II, just before the entrance of Macbeth, who will leave the stage to murder Duncan, Shakespeare once more presents Banquo. In his customary manner, he is aware of the supernatural powers
above and below. It is a dark night: 'There's husbandry in heaven; / Their candles are all out' [II. i. 4-5].
('Stars, hide your fires!' 'Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark' [I. iv. 50, I. v. 53]. Apparently, the
demonic prayers of Macbeth and his lady have been answered.) But though the night is indeed dark, Banquo's
words have, beyond his awareness, a prophetic undertone: if husbandry means thrift, it also means wise
management. Hence, through Banquo, obliquely, the irresistible justice and omniscience of heaven is being
urged. Banquo continues to Fleance, 'A heavy summons lies like lead upon me, / And yet I would not sleep'
[II. i. 6-7]. The first line might suggest that the dark powers are working upon him to get him out of the way
of the criminals; at any rate, his soul apprehends evil. So, being the kind of man he is, he prays to the
instruments of light to fight against the instruments of darkness:

Merciful powers,
Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature
Gives way to in repose.
[II. i. 7-9]

To Bradley, 'the poison [of the witches] has begun to work' but that is not at all the purport of these lines; they
are there for comparison. Everyman is constantly being tempted by evil: during waking hours, he is free to
expel it from his mind; but while he and his will are asleep, the demons can invade his dreams. (Macbeth a
few lines later puts the matter clearly: 'wicked dreams abuse / The curtain'd sleep' [I. ii. 50-1].) Therefore,
Banquo prays for grace, for holy power outside himself to repel the demons. In contrast Macbeth and Lady
Macbeth have prayed far otherwise.

After Macbeth's entrance, Banquo declares: 'I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters. / To you they have
showed some truth' [I. ii. 20-1]. These are the 'cursed thoughts' that Banquo wishes to expunge—and it is as
though Banquo, as instrument rather than as character, unwittingly, is testing Macbeth. Macbeth feels this, he
wants to get Banquo on his side, he wants to talk to Banquo about the witches.

Ban. At your kind'st leisure.
Mac. If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis,
It shall make honor for you.
Ban. So I lose none
In seeking to augment it but still keep
My bosom franchis'd and allegiance clear,
I shall be counsel'd.
[I. ii. 24-9]

Bradley found this Banquo-Macbeth colloquy 'difficult to interpret'. So it is, inspected as realism, but if one
regards the two speakers here not so much as people but as morality play figures who have chosen different
sides in the struggle between Heaven and Hell, there is little difficulty. Macbeth is the representative of the
Tempter, and Banquo refuses the bait, not with polite evasiveness but with formal rejection. For there is a
dichotomy both in Macbeth and in Macbeth's world as long as Banquo represents the good; from Macbeth's
viewpoint, Banquo must either be absorbed or destroyed if Macbeth is to gain ease.

In [II. iii], when Macduff tells Banquo that their king has been murdered, Lady Macbeth cries, 'Woe, alas! /What, in our house?' [II. iii. 87-8]. Banquo's reply is a semi-rebuke that comes automatically to his lips, 'Too
cruel anywhere' [II. iii. 88]. He is not hiding anything: there is such correspondence between his mind and his
mouth that his three words dismiss his hostess' apparently limited morality and express a universal reaction.
But Banquo is not suspicious of any single person, yet; he does not know who or what the enemy is, yet. All
he knows is that he is innocent and that a great crime has been committed:
In the great hand of God I stand, and thence
Against the undivulg'd pretense I fight
Of treasonous malice.
[II. iii. 130-32]

Note how the combatants in the action have been depersonalized by Banquo's words; the war between Good and Evil is larger than people. (pp. 2-5)

Act III begins with Macbeth king, and Banquo suspecting he played most fouly for it. It is not allowable, dramatically speaking, to conjecture anything about Banquo between his last appearance and his present appearance. Furthermore, the 'indissoluble tie' is that between a king and his subject, and there is nothing evil in it. The 'grave and prosperous' advice [III. i. 21] is not criminal aid to the murderer but political counsel to his sovereign. As to Banquo's character and motives in regard to the crown, all the soliloquy tells us is that he anticipates great honour as a founder of a royal line. There is not a hint that he will play 'most fouly' to make the prophecy come true. Primarily, the soliloquy is meant to remind the audience of what the witches told Banquo two full acts back, for that promise may be said to guide the action of the play until the blood-boltered Banquo points at the show of the eight kings—and even then Macbeth's horror at this truth motivates his slaughter of Lady Macduff. As usual Shakespeare's purpose with Banquo here is not similarity but dissimilarity. Dramaturgically, Banquo must be maintained as contrast.

That it is not Banquo so much as person but what he still epitomizes which prompts Macbeth to kill his one-time companion is brought out, I believe, in Macbeth's famous soliloquy:

To be thus is nothing
But to be safely thus. Our fears in Banquo
Stick deep, and in his royalty of nature
Reigns that which would be fear'd. . . .
[III. i. 48-51]

What is it that Macbeth fears? Is it really Banquo the man? Or is it the latter's still unsullied qualities—his natural royalty, his dauntless temper, his wise valour? Banquo represents what a part of Macbeth wants and, also, what a part of Macbeth hates. He is truly, as the witches declared, both happier and greater than the regicide. Let us put it this way: Macbeth is jealous of Banquo's virtues, wants them but cannot have them, feels belittled by them, fears them, and hence must destroy them. The killing of Banquo may be interpreted as a futile effort on Macbeth's part to destroy his own better humanity; it is a ghastly effort to unify Macbeth's inner and outer world, for Banquo has a daily beauty in his life that makes Macbeth ugly. The fear of an 'unlineal hand', the belief that Banquo's issue will immediately succeed him are rationalizations, the false coinage of an agonized man who has sold his soul to the devil, who has exchanged his 'eternal jewel' for a poisoned, tortured mind. It is not really Banquo the person whom Macbeth fears: it is Banquo as symbol, he who stood 'In the great hand of God'. (pp. 6-8)


**Essays: Character Study of Macbeth: From "Brave Macbeth" to "Dead Butcher"**

There can be no play without characters to tell the story. In Shakespeare's plays, though he borrowed many of his stories, the characters are his own inventions based on various sources. Although there is no mention anywhere in the text of the play of any of Macbeth's physical characteristics, such as height or hair and eye
colour, we do see a psychological progression from 'brave Macbeth' (1.1.16) to 'dead butcher' (5.9.36). The playwright, through the actor playing the role, gives us an almost diagrammatic study in the destruction of a man and his reputation, as well as the rebirth of Scotland.

Unlike many other Shakespeare plays, the eponymous hero does not make his entrance until the third scene of Act I. When the play opens, we are given only a brief sketch to whet our expectations. The witches are the first characters we see, and if Shakespeare intended to grab our attention, this opening surely does it. They are 'real' in the sense that we can actually see them, but they are also supernatural in that we believe witches belong to the world of evil spirits and sing-song spells. In lines 7-8, they inform us that they are to meet Macbeth upon the heath - nothing else. But we must wonder: why Macbeth? Why on the heath? What do they want?

The following scene takes us to a battlefield. King Duncan receives details of a fight between his forces and the rebels forces led by Macdonald and troops from Norway. The Captain tells the King that 'brave Macbeth' (1.2.16) met the traitor Macdonald with his sword drawn and killed him in a very horrible and gory manner. Thus our first description of Macbeth is that of a brave, loyal soldier defending his King and country from those who would take the throne and enslave the people. The King is so pleased with Macbeth's performance that he gives Macbeth the traitor's title, Thane of Cawdor, calling him 'noble Macbeth' (1.2.67). Thus we are led to believe that Macbeth is a good man, loyal, courageous, and determined. He has proven his valour and is duly rewarded by the King.

Immediately following, however, we are shown the witches for the second time in three scenes, effectively framing Macbeth the soldier with witches, which could imply that Macbeth is no ordinary warrior. When Macbeth enters, his opening lines echo those of the witches in the first scene:

Witches. Fair is foul and foul is fair … (1.1.12)
Macbeth. So foul and fair a day I have not seen (1.3.36)

Obviously, then, there is some link between Macbeth and the witches. At this point, however, we do not know the nature of the relationship, only that the witches intend to meet Macbeth, but the implication is that this is an unholy alliance.

It is not long before we witness the meeting. While Macbeth's friend, Banquo, stands near him, the witches greet Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and 'king hereafter' (1.3.43). Macbeth is startled by what he hears. He knows he is already Thane of Glamis, but does not know, as we do, that Duncan has promoted him to Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth, and we as well, are surprised by the promise of kingship. Banquo's prophecy is even more fantastic: he will be the father of kings but not king, and will be greater and happier than Macbeth! Yet, just like us, Macbeth wants to know more. Why did the Weird Sisters address him as Cawdor and king? Where did they get their information? Why deliver the prophecies on the heath? We know about the heath and Cawdor, but we do not know the source of the other prophecies. Is it possible that the witches are able to tell the future?

When Ross and Angus enter to proclaim Macbeth's promotion, the announcement comes as a surprise to him, and temporarily our attention is diverted since the two men merely state what we have already seen. More subtly, however, as Macbeth believes the event to be a fulfilment of a prophecy, we note somewhere in the back of our minds that we do not have any information about Macbeth that would allow us to understand how he could become king, especially since we are unaware of any problems with the present King. What Shakespeare is doing here with Macbeth is comparable to peeling an onion: this character will be revealed layer by layer.
In the next few lines it becomes apparent that Macbeth not only has thought about being king, but he also believes what the witches tell him is true:

Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor:
The greatest is behind …
Two truths are told,
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme. (1.3.115-116, 126-128)

Macbeth knows that in order to become king, Duncan must die, by natural or unnatural means, and this last thought strikes him with panic and fear while he debates the good or bad of the prophecies. That he did not dismiss them right away as ridiculous indicates that in spite of his bravery as a soldier, Macbeth is not totally committed to Duncan. He has ambitions for himself, and if anything stands in his way, he will probably eliminate it. Macbeth's change has begun.

When Macbeth presents himself before Duncan, however, he pledges his 'service and loyalty' (1.4.22) to Duncan without reservation. Once Duncan announces he has made his eldest son, Malcolm, his heir and Prince of Cumberland, Macbeth's response is immediate:

… that is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies. (1.4.48-50)

As rapidly as we are thrown into the events of the play, we are shown that Macbeth not only loves his King and country, but also himself. It still remains to be seen what action he will take.

We do not have to wait long, because the next scene takes us to Macbeth's home where we meet his wife, Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth has just received a letter from her husband in which we learn more about him. Apparently in an effort to find out more about the prophecies, Macbeth has had the witches investigated and has

… learned by the perfectest report that they have more in them than mortal knowledge.
(1.5.2-3)

It is clear that after calling the witches 'imperfect speakers' (1.3.68), Macbeth has now changed his mind. Macbeth also mediates and interprets the prophecies and conveys his version to his wife which differs to the one we know.

Macbeth calls Lady Macbeth 'my dearest partner of greatness' (1.5.9-10) and here it seems he is sincere. Lady Macbeth, however, is determined that her husband becomes king and in her speech, implies he lacks the qualities necessary to assassinate Duncan without remorse or regret. She waits anxiously for Macbeth so that she can spur him on to regicide. She is so bent on the 'golden round' (1.5.26) that she prays for supernatural help to devoid her of any feminine traits and reinforce her 'fell purpose' (1.5.44). When her husband arrives, she begins her campaign by greeting him with the two titles he has and implies the third - king.

The rest of scene involves Lady Macbeth telling her husband to 'Leave all the rest to me' (1.5.71). These six words not only implicate Lady Macbeth in the murder of Duncan, but they also cause us to wonder if the pair will succeed in their act of assassination. Given that Macbeth has shown some doubt, perhaps the plan will fail.
Duncan arrives at the castle and while the King eats dinner and prepares to sleep peacefully, Macbeth is still debating how he can achieve the crown without getting caught or punished. His wife joins him in this reverie, and severely rebukes him for his confusion. She tells him that he is less than a man if he does not carry out the murder, and that she, a mere woman, has more strength of purpose than he. As Lady Macbeth unfolds the details to her husband, she is also telling us the plan and implicating us as we sit helpless in the audience. The two are in agreement as we move closer and closer to the murder of the King.

In the opening scene of Act II, the murder is committed. In the short space of eight scenes, Shakespeare gives us all the information (and a bit more) that we need to understand the character of Macbeth. We have seen him at his best and at his worst. We have witnessed his succumbing to the entreaties of his wife, and we have seen him go off to kill not only the King, but also any witnesses to the act. Everything that happens from this point forward will be based on our observations: Macbeth seizing the crown; the dissolution of his marriage and the death of his Queen; the murders of Banquo, Lady Macduff and the children; the death of Lady Macbeth; Macbeth's defeat and death.

Macbeth will consult the witches once more and since he believed their prophecies at the beginning of the play, we know that he will believe the Apparitions that he forces them to conjure. However, we also know that because of his inability to think clearly, he will not understand their true meaning and arrive at his own erroneous conclusions. But this character in the person of the actor tells more than one story.

According to Machiavelli in The Prince, the ends of political power justify any means taken to achieve them. Macbeth clearly shows not only the action of unbridled ambition, but also its results. Perhaps one of the reasons for the play's continued popularity is its portrayal of a politician that we can all recognise in our present day systems.

The character of Macbeth also serves as a metaphor for birth and death on several levels. On the one hand, Macbeth marks the birth of a new political ideology and the death of a tradition. On another, Malcolm's creation of the first Scottish earls from the thanes marks the birth of a new society, while Macbeth's death signals the end of the old. Still further, the childlessness of the Macbeths compared to the families of Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff reflects these societal changes. Perhaps most uniquely, Macbeth lacks any sub-plot and therefore, there is no comedy (except the Porter, 2.3) to offset the intensity of the tragedy nor is there any thread of bawdiness (except the Porter, 2.3 and the witches, 1.3 and 1.4).

Although Macbeth is the shortest of all of Shakespeare's plays (2,108 lines), the playwright does not take any shortcuts in developing Macbeth as a human being who, when given a choice, chooses his own gain instead of his people's welfare. He also puts himself before any consideration of family or the community that is comprised of those families. We are presented not only with a soldier who killed his way to the throne of Scotland, but also a man who could be our next-door neighbour. And that, with the warning of the witches, is really scary.

**Essays: Who are the Witches?**

Shakespeare's handling of the three witches or "weird sisters" of Macbeth is in itself equivocal. He assigns them the first dozen lines of the play their proclamation that "fair is foul, and foul is fair" (I, i., .11) setting the tone for the horrid events ahead. When their prediction of Act I, scene iii that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor comes true almost instantaneously, the broad contours of the play's plot are set; Macbeth will become king of Scotland and this will require the elimination of Duncan and his sons. While the witches perform seminal and salient functions in the play, their appearance on stage is nonetheless limited. Assuming that Act III, scene v. of Macbeth as we have it was written into the play after the Bard's death, Shakespeare gives us only one more glimpse of the weird sisters in Act IV, scene i. with its famous "double, double, toil and
trouble" (l.10) invocation of evil. We see very little of the witches and this, in turn, contributes to our uncertainty about who or what they are. They clearly possess supernatural powers, including the capacity to foretell the future and to read the minds of the mortals with whom they come in contact, and this suggests that they are real but supernatural. On the other hand, even after their final manifestation at the start of Act IV, Shakespeare undercuts the reality of the witches, again raising the possibility that the weird sisters are an hallucination, an emanation from the human psyche.

The key characteristic of Macbeth's witches is that while they can influence Macbeth's actions, they cannot compel him to commit the evil deeds that he undertakes in the course of the Scottish tragedy. This limitation on the power of the weird sisters, their dependency upon human will to work their black arts, is highlighted by the difference between Banquo's reaction to their initial predictions and that of Macbeth. After their encounter with the witches in Act I, scene iii, Banquo wonders aloud about whether they were real or whether he and Macbeth are suffering from some type of hallucination: "Were such things here as we do speak about?/Or have we eaten on the insane root/That takes the reason prisoner?" (I, iii., ll.83-85). It is not Macbeth, but Banquo, who first notices the witches on the heath, asking Macbeth: "What are these/So withered and so wild in their attire/That look not like th' inhabitants of the earth/And yet are on't" (I, iii, ll.39-42). They do not respond to these questions, but simply hail Macbeth, first as Thane of Glamis, then as Thane of Cawdor, and finally as "King hereafter." When Banquo asks that witches if they can foretell future, they hail him as a future sire of Scottish monarchs, and when Macbeth then asks the witches to explain their salutations and the means by which foresee future, they vanish into thin air. Banquo ultimately concludes that the witches are not an hallucination, nor are they of substance, explaining to Macbeth that, "the earth hath bubbles, as the water has/And these are of them" (I, iii, ll.79-80).

Since both Macbeth and Banquo actually see the witches, and since both are of sound mind before and immediately after this encounter, the alternative thesis that the witches are only mental figments seems false. Moreover, Lady Macbeth (while she is in her right mind) accepts the reality of the witches having an independent existence. Nevertheless, Shakespeare deliberately upsets any firm conclusions as to who or what the weird sisters are. When Lennox arrives in Act IV, scene i, after the witches have vanished into air, Macbeth asks whether he saw them. Lennox replies with a simply no, and while his failure to see them is most plausibly the result of his having entered the scene too late, we are again thrown off balance.

Leaving the issue of the witches' nature aside for the moment, we find that while the weird sisters can influence humans like Macbeth to carry out heinous acts, they cannot force them to do so, nor do they intervene directly in the commission of crimes. In facing the weird sisters, Macbeth undergoes a two-stage process: he first determines that they are credible and then decides to act upon this assumption. The first step occurs when word comes through Rosse and Angus that King Duncan has directed them to call Macbeth by his new title of Thane of Cawdor. Both Macbeth and Banquo then lend credence to the witches' ability to see into the future. Banquo, however, refuses the temptation of taking the second step, saying that, "The instruments of darkness tell us truths./Win us with honest trifles, to betray 's/In deepest consequence" (I, iii., ll.124-126). Macbeth, however, furnishes the witches with the essential ingredient for the mayhem they are brewing, the agency of his will. He first assumes a neutral stance toward acting upon the prediction that he will become king, asserting that "This supernatural soliciting/Cannot be ill, cannot be good" (I, iii., ll.130-131). Macbeth presumes that even though his encounter with the witches incites terror in him, it cannot be "ill" because it augured his success in becoming Thane of Cawdor. At this juncture, Macbeth has headed down a slippery slope: once he proceeds with "weighing" the value of the witches' predictions he is only a short distance from subordinating his own will into an instrumentality of evil.

The contrast between Banquo and Macbeth in relation to the witches surfaces again at the start of Act II when Banquo confides to Macbeth that he has dreamt of the three weird sisters, while Macbeth replies that "I think not of them" (l.22). This is, of course, a lie and a denial of reality, for right after this exchange and once
Banquo leaves, Macbeth sees a dagger hovering before his eyes, and places it in the specific context of his meeting with the witches: "Now o'er the one half world/Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse/The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates/Pale Hecat's offerings" (II, i., ll.49-51). It is important to note that in his second (and final) encounter with the witches (Act IV, scene i.), Macbeth takes an active hand in conjuring the apparitions that furnish him with an equivocal security about his future as Scotland's king. In the course of the play, the witches paradoxically become less real, but more potent. In the end, the reality of the witches is predicated upon the willingness of human beings to perform their evil handiwork and in the character of Macbeth, this willingness is plainly present.

**Essays: Why Does Macbeth Change His Mind About Killing Duncan?**

At end of Act I, Macbeth declares, "I am settled, and bend up/Each corporal agent to this terrible feat" (I, vii, ll.79-80). Given the witches' prediction that he will become Scotland's king, we have ample reason to believe that Macbeth and his partner in regicide, Lady Macbeth, will succeed in their enterprise of murdering Duncan. What is most remarkable is that just fifty lines earlier, Macbeth has flatly told his wife that they shall proceed no further in the bloody business at hand; in the midst of Lady Macbeth's subsequent argument against such "unmanly" inaction, he commands her to hold her peace. Lady Macbeth defies him, and the spurs embedded in her reply tap deeply into Macbeth's psyche. Most interpreters have focused on Lady Macbeth's skillful manipulation of gender identities and the strong innuendo of sexual tension between the two in their explanations of why Macbeth changes his mind and decides to kill the king. But Macbeth is not merely a susceptible puppet of his wife's finely-honed goading, for while she is the prime mover in the assassination of Duncan, the other murders in the play (of Banquo and MacDuff's family) are exclusively Macbeth's doing and this shows that he retains the capacity for independent action. Lady Macbeth's influence is a catalyst, but Macbeth is a willing object of her persuasions, but the seeds of his decision are sown well before the end of Act I.

The witches' promised intention to meet Macbeth aside, the first we hear of him is in Act I, scene ii, as a wounded sergeant reports that "brave Macbeth" swathed in the blood of the rebels, "unseam'd" the old Thane of Cawdor "from the nave to th' chops" (I, ii., l.22) and then impaled his head upon battlements. The loyal officer Rosse then says that Macbeth is "Bellona's bridegroom" (I, ii., l.54), Bellona being the virgin goddess of war. Even before he arrives on stage, we know that Macbeth is capable of bloody deeds (in a good cause), while the figurative reference to Bellona will soon materialize in the character of Lady Macbeth. It is after this, in Act I, scene iii, the Macbeth and Banquo encounter the witches with their intriguing prediction that Macbeth will become Scotland's monarch. Macbeth leaves open the normative question of whether this prediction is good or ill, but when he becomes Thane of Cawdor by "chance," he speculates that it may be possible for him to become king "without my stir" (I, iii, l.143).

Macbeth's hopes for a passive and legitimate route to the throne are dashed in the very next scene of the play. In Act I, scene iv, the good King Duncan tells Macbeth that he owes more to his loyal general than he can pay (l.20), and Macbeth then dutifully replies that the service and loyalty he owes to the king are payment in itself. This is somewhat illogical, but for a brief moment it appears that Macbeth might becoming king without "stirring," that Duncan might name him as his successor. But after Duncan names his son Malcolm as heir apparent, Macbeth realizes that the prophecy that he will become Scotland's monarch will not unfold without action on his part. He acknowledges that this will entail Duncan's murder and that his ambitions have caused him to develop a still notional murder plan. Toward the end of the scene, Macbeth withdraws and, in a stage aside, he tells us the naming of Malcolm is a step that bars his ascent to the throne. His ambition is so powerful, moreover, that he fears that his evil intentions will be discerned, saying "Stars, hide your fires,/Let not light see my black and deep desires (I, iv, ll.50-51)."
At the start of Act I, scene vii, Macbeth is considering the technical parameters of a hypothetical murder, finding "If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well/It were done quickly" (I.1-2). When his fears about the consequences of detection surface, Macbeth begins to list the reasons for not assassinating the king. He turns first to customary personal loyalty, observing that Duncan is a blood relative and, as such, that Macbeth should protect the king against knife rather than wield it against him. Secondarily, he says that Duncan has been a good king, against whom he has no grievance. But he fails to mention the most obvious reason for refraining from murder, that it is morally wrong, a cardinal sin that deserves damnation whether detected by human agency or not. Instead, he urns to making an inventory of the resources he would need, should he decide to move forward. On this count, Macbeth finds one thing lacking, "I have no spur/To prick the sides of my intent, but only/Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself" (I, vii, 1.25-27).

It is then that the "spur" appears (almost as if Macbeth had conjured it into being) as Lady Macbeth enters the scene. Initially, Macbeth is adamant in his rejection of the course that they both know must be taken if he is to become Scotland's ruler, and tells his wife that they shall proceed no further in this business. Now Lady Macbeth launches into her argument, and the "spur" that has captured the critic's attention is her charge that Macbeth is a coward. In fact, she does not directly say this (she merely asks if her is prepared to live like a coward), nor is it the crux of her case. Indeed, Macbeth has a rebuttal to the coward charge, asserting to Lady Macbeth, "I dare do all that may become a man;/Who dares do more is none" (I, vii, 1.46-47), and he then commands her to be silent. But Lady Macbeth need not heed her duty toward her husband, for there is a second plank to her counter-argument; she tells Macbeth that if he does not follow through on their developing plot then he has broken a promise to her. She first asks whether the "hope" that he raised for their royalty in the letter that he sent to her after meeting the witches was "drunk." She then says that since the expectations he raised in this missive were false, she will accord his professions of love to her to be equally false. That being so, some "beast" must have egged Macbeth on to breaking the bonds of trust with his wife by making promises (the attainment of the throne) that are then withdrawn.

It is at this juncture that Lady Macbeth enters into her famous "phantom child" speech, saying to Macbeth: "I have given suck, and know/How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me; I would, while it was smiling in my face,/Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,/And dashed the brains out, had I shown as you/Have done to this" (I, vii, 1.54-58). Although the attention of modern critics has centered upon the gender and sexual aspects of this speech, especially in conjunction with Lady Macbeth's earlier "desexing" soliloquy in Act I, scene v, II., the thrust of the argument pivots on trust, specifically the trust that unites husband and wife.

Lastly, Macbeth returns to practical issues of execution. He seems to seek reassurance rather than an opportunity to back out, having already determined that his bond to Lady Macbeth requires him to act, when he asks her "what if we should fail?" Lady Macbeth has her follow-on answer and the details of the murder plan set. She says that only fear will cause their plan to fail and then lays out plot that pivots around pinning the blame for king's death upon "spungy officers" drugged into "swinish" sleep (her reference to "swine" creating one of many associations between Lady Macbeth and the witches). The irony here is Macbeth's decision to murder Duncan rests upon what he sees as the dictates of his natural relation with his wife, but the relation between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is no longer natural, but purposively unnatural, Lady Macbeth having shorn herself of maternal gender, Macbeth having entered into an unholy relation with the witches that will ultimately supplant his marriage to Lady Macbeth altogether.

**Essays: Character Study of Lady Macbeth**

With the possible exception of King Lear, no character in any of Shakespeare's plays undergoes such a radical devolution as that which transforms Lady Macbeth from a nearly superhuman character in the first act of Macbeth into a sleep-walking zombie at the start of Act V. When we first see Lady Macbeth on stage, she is plainly in command of her faculties and, in fact, she has deliberately intensified her capacity to realize her
royal ambitions for power. But after her ineffective efforts to control Macbeth's reaction to the Ghost of Banquo in Act III, scene iv., in which she says that all her husband and partner in crime needs is sleep, Lady Macbeth disappears from the play. We learn of her again at the start of Act V when a doctor and one of her ladies in waiting discuss her insomnia. This hardly prepares us for the spectral figure who next appears, as Lady Macbeth enters sleepwalking uttering words that are laden with guilt and a pathetic longing for the comfort of her absent husband. Even before Macbeth is told by Seyton that Lady Macbeth is dead (Act V, scene iv), we recognize that she is no longer herself but merely a shadow, a living ghost.

We first see Lady Macbeth in Act I, scene v. alone and reading a letter from her husband that speaks about his meeting with the weird sisters and their prophecy that he will become Scotland's king. Lady Macbeth issues no response to Macbeth's fantastic story. She focuses instead on the prospects for Macbeth's acting to fulfill the prediction and finds that he may be too full of the milk of human kindness to carry out the required deed of killing Duncan. She then summons her husband in a conjuring spell: "Hie thee hither./That I might pour my spirits in thine ear,/And chastise with the valor of my tongue/All that impedes three from the golden round./Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem/To have thee crown'd withal" (I, v, ll.25-29). Her designs are congruent with those of the weird sisters, but Lady Macbeth's invocation is far more splendid and powerful in its language than the inarticulate (but cunning) statements of the witches.

Learning that King Duncan is coming to their castle and thereby providing an opportunity to kill him, Lady Macbeth calls upon spirits to unsex her, "And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full/ Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood;/Stop up the access and passage to remorse,/That no compunctious visitings of nature/Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between/The effect and it" (I, v, ll.46-51). The speech resembles Macbeth's "stars hide your fires" speech in the prior scene, but we also note that Lady Macbeth fails to consider that "compunctious visitings of nature" might arise after the crime has been committed, and that her voluntary "de-sexing" alters her natural bond with Macbeth.

After Lady Macbeth has ceremonially drained all feminine kindness from her spirit, Macbeth enters, and Lady tells him that Duncan must be "provided for," the innuendo being that it is murder that comprises the night's business. He puts her off, saying that they shall speak about the matter later, but we note that Lady Macbeth does not name the deed at hand, referring to as "this enterprise." Since the two speak openly about their plot, we cannot ascribe this reticence to name the deed to simple prudence; it may be that moral inhibitions prevent Lady Macbeth from naming the sin she has in mind. But when Duncan arrives in Act I, scene vi, he is greeted first by Lady Macbeth alone, she uses an ironic pun in saying that everything has been "doubly done" on Duncan's behalf, the connotation of duplicity suggests that Lady Macbeth may use her ability for verbal equivocation to some advantage. In short order, this impression is reinforced, for she easily persuades Macbeth to take the plunge into regicide in Act I, scene vii.

Things do not go as planned. Not only does Macbeth fail to carry out his wife's instructions concerning the placement of the murder daggers, the blame does not fall upon Duncan's guards but upon Malcolm and Donalbain, the king's two sons, who have fled the scene. At the midpoint of the play, in Act III, scene ii, Lady Macbeth worries aloud, asks a servant whether Banquo is gone from the castle, and then sends him with a message for King Macbeth. For the first time we see that Lady Macbeth is not satisfied with the outcome of her plan, saying in a soliloquy, "Nought's had, all's spent/Where our desire is go without content;/'Tis safer to be that which we destroy/Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy" (III, ii., ll.4-7). When Macbeth enters, she chastises him for leaving her alone and then advises him to "sleek over" his "rugged looks," and be "bright and jovial" at banquet. (III, ii. ll.27-28). He first advises her to do the same and then says that she should remains ignorant of his plans to dispose of Banquo and Fleance. In the banquet scene itself, Lady Macbeth is unable to rein in her husband's guilty horror at seeing Banquo's ghost, and her handling of the guests is inept.

Lady Macbeth is absent for the play and her reappearance at the opening of Act V is presaged by the worried comments of her doctor and one of her gentlewomen. As Lady Macbeth enters silently, the two refer to her
behavior as if she no longer existed. They note her compulsive habit of washing her hands, and, consistent with this diagnosis, the first words that the devolved Lady Macbeth speaks are "a spot." We soon realize that in her own mind, Lady Macbeth's hands are unclean and that she cannot command an imagined "damn'd spot" to disappear. Completely oblivious to those around her, Lady Macbeth transfers this symptom of guilt to Macbeth, saying "Wash your hands, put on your nightgown, look not so pale. I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on 's grave" (V, i., ll.62-64). Macbeth, of course, is not present, for he has gone to the battlefield, but in her final speech, Lady Macbeth's desire for conjugal partnership comes forth, as she says to her imagined husband, "To bed, to bed, there's knocking at the gate. Come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed" (V, i., ll.66-68). In Act V, scene iii, Macbeth commands the doctor to cure Lady Macbeth, to which the physician replies, "Therein the patient must minister to himself" (V, iii, l.45), and shortly thereafter Macbeth is told of his wife's death, presumably as a result of suicide.

Looking back, After the murder of the King, Macbeth withdraws from his marital relationship to Lady Macbeth and no longer relies upon his wife's capacity to interpret events for him. He keeps his plans to have Banquo and Fleance killed from her, saying to his one-time partner, "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck/Till thou applaud the deed" (III, ii, ll.50-51). By the banquet scene of Act III, Lady Macbeth is no longer part of her husband's world, he no longer needs her as a spur to ambition. Deprived of her function in directing Macbeth's acts, Lady Macbeth is left alone and without further purpose. Long before Macbeth concludes that life is a tale told by an idiot, Lady Macbeth, no longer a wife nor even a natural woman, has entered into a twilight realm in which there is no active role for her to perform nor any means through which guilt can be extinguished.

### Essays: Macbeth: On Stage, Screen, and Television

The complexity of the character of Macbeth and the 'curse' that attends its performance in the theatre would seem to make it a poor choice for performance. It is these very qualities, however, that make it one of the most popular plays in the canon. The role of Macbeth has the ability to provoke sympathy and ire occurring in the text simultaneously, but these qualities only become clearer when an actor brings the play to life on the stage, in a film, or in a television programme. Which element is emphasised is the choice of the director, and this choice affects the play's balance and overall impact.

Unlike many of Shakespeare's plays, there is an eye-witness account of a performance at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London: '…Makbeth at the Glob, 1610, the 20 of Aprill.' Dr. Simon Forman, an advisor to the Privy Council during the Gunpowder Plot investigation, made this entry into his diary, and although Dr. Forman gets quite a few of the details of the play incorrect, there is no doubt that he did indeed see the play.

After the English monarchy was restored in 1660, theatres which had been closed by Oliver Cromwell were re-opened by King Charles II. He granted royal patents to William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew for theatres to be established on former tennis courts. Shakespeare's plays were divided between the two men, with Macbeth going to Davenant. Samuel Pepys noted in his diary on 5 November 1664 (the fifty-ninth anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot) that the play was 'a pretty good play, but admirably acted'. The popularity of Davenant's production was partly attributable to the singing and dancing witches who also flew around the stage, thereby creating comedy absent from the text. Treating the witches as comic eliminates any threat they pose to Macbeth or Lady Macbeth, and weakens one of the main arguments of the play: free will versus Fate. The burden of malice therefore lands on Lady Macbeth. This event has the knock-on effect of making Macbeth a hero controlled and spurred on in his murderous reign by a cold, ambitious, deceitful wife. Clearly this is only one of many interpretations of the text.
In 1744, David Garrick performed the role in a text that he himself had revised to be closer to the First Folio text (1623). The version seen by Samuel Pepys (Davenant's) did, however, influence Garrick. Unfortunately, in Garrick's version, he cut much of the text and inserted his own written speeches, such as a death speech for Macbeth in which he tries to repent but gives up hope:

I cannot rise! I dare not ask for mercy -
It is too late, hell drags me down; I sink,
I sink - Oh! - my soul is lost forever!
Oh!

John Philip Kemble, an actor-theatre manager, trimmed even more text than either Davenant or Garrick by cutting Lady Macduff, her son, and the Porter, while he emphasised spectacle. Instead of three witches, Kemble had a singing, dancing comic chorus of more than fifty people, in a version that held the stage from the end of the 18th century well into the 19th. As with Davenant, cutting the text of the shortest play in the Shakespeare canon resulted in shifting the emphasis on evil from the witches to Lady Macbeth in both the Garrick and Kemble productions.

As cultural attitudes toward women began to mitigate and change in the mid-nineteenth century, however, the interpretative focus moved once again. While the witches and Lady Macbeth were relieved of much of their comic evil and malice, Macbeth himself was severely indicted for his innate greed and ambition, especially in productions and performances by William Macready at The Drury Lane Theatre, London. The production was a milestone in the staging of the play which was done in the Jacobean style, and thereafter, Macbeth was almost always a darker character than he had been previously. After Macready, the Macbeth productions most acclaimed were those by Henry Irving and Herbert Beerbohm Tree.

Irving's Macbeth was more indecisive than any Hamlet, yet an unrepentant villain. The choice of this stress on Macbeth meant that Lady Macbeth became a devoted, gentle wife who only wanted the best for her husband. Critics attacked this view, claiming it made the marriage unbelievable and contrary to Shakespeare's play.

For Tree, a stickler for highly detailed, representational staging, Macbeth was a ghost-inhabited dreamscape in some sections, and critics thought that Tree's performance was ineffectual and forgettable. Some of his staging, such as Macbeth speaking the prophecies of the Apparitions, continued to influence 20th century productions, especially those of the Royal Shakespeare Company headquartered in Stratford-upon-Avon.

The next important and acclaimed English productions starred Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh in 1955, and Ian McKellan and Judi Dench in 1976-1978, both at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon. In this outing, Olivier's Macbeth was heroic but fatally flawed, while Leigh's Lady Macbeth was weak and frail. Directed by Trevor Nunn, now director of the National Theatre in London, the McKellan-Dench production characterised the witches as demonic forces with far-reaching influence. The emphasis on the joint crime of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth did not allow either of them to escape responsibility for their horrible deeds. Yet at the same time, the audience's sympathy for their tragedy was paradoxically aroused.

Where were the Americans in all this? Because American theatre until the late 19th century consisted mostly of touring companies from England who performed only sections of the play, it was up to the famous Cushman Sisters to bring the complete play to American theatres in the late 1800's with a text that Charlotte Cushman felt 'restored' Shakespeare, but which was simply the First Folio text. The biggest contribution of the Americans was their desire to make use of the new medium of film, and advances in film technology meant that the witches and Apparitions no longer presented much of a problem for filmic expression. Orson Welles, considered a wunderkind after his debut as writer/director of the film classic Citizen Kane, staged the play in 1936 in a Caribbean context and earned the production the nickname 'voodoo Macbeth'. He nonetheless based his 1948 treatment on his stage production. The Welles effort, based on a highly edited text, uses many of film
noir's filmic expressions, producing a group of menacing hag-witches, a dark, brooding, villainous Macbeth, and a sexy but aggressive Lady Macbeth.

Two other notable film efforts are Japanese director Akira Kurasawa's Kumonosu-ju (Throne of Blood, 1957), and Roman Polanski's text-based film (1971). Kurasawa's film is more aptly called an appropriation of the play. It omits Malcolm and the business around him, and the Porter. The three witches are reduced to one, and Kurasawa draws heavily on the conventions of Japanese Noh drama which dictates minimal and sometimes mechanical movement.

Polanski's interpretation of the play, though panned by the critics at the time, illustrates some of the descriptive passages of the text with strong, visual images, such as the execution of Cawdor, and, most notably, the murder of Duncan, which in the play, takes place offstage. It remains the only depiction of the murder, either on stage or film. Polanski, like Franco Zeffirelli in the 1968 Romeo and Juliet, used a very young couple for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Despite re-ordering the plays' scenes, this Macbeth remains 'bloody, bold, and resolute' as his wife remains tender and adoring. She dies by throwing herself from a tower and audiences witness Macbeth's head rolling down a street, but the focus is on the malevolence of the witches: an old hag, a middle-aged disfigured woman, and a young girl. The women are part of an all-female coven that in Act IV, scene i, meet in the nude. Overall, the film retains its thoughtfully created strongly male, unrelenting violent impact.

Versions for television have been less successful, although two are outstanding: the BBC Shakespeare (1982) with Nicol Williamson and Jane Laportaire, and Macbeth on the Estate, directed by Michael Bogdanov (1997). In the BBC version, Macbeth is weak and Lady Macbeth is sexy and strong in Act I, scene i. These roles reverse themselves subtly throughout the play, so that by the conclusion, the two are destroyed by their own weaknesses.

Macbeth on the Estate takes place in a public housing development in a ghetto of a Northern English city. The political conflict is between two rival gangs. The letter from Macbeth to Lady Macbeth at the opening becomes a message left on an answering machine. The witches are two young boys and a little girl. The most interesting choice is the line taken with Lady Macbeth. She is close friends with Lady Macduff and frequently baby-sits for the Macduff children, including an infant. When Lady Macbeth receives Macbeth's message, she retreats to a small nursery with an empty crib and a baby's picture on a chest of drawers. The 'unsex me here' speech (1.53-52) is delivered while Lady Macbeth crouches in a corner of the nursery, but the heartbreak ultimately drives her to madness when she witnesses the murders of Lady Macbeth and the children by her husband. The film's brutal honesty underline Macbeth's brutality, and, without undermining the power of the witches, demonstrates that Macbeth is open to free choice, but chooses badly.

The most recent staging to receive critical approval is that of Sir Antony Sher and Harriet Walter in a Royal Shakespeare Company production that toured the United Kingdom, the United States, and several other countries. The production was filmed and blocked for television and aired on 2 January 2001 in England. It takes place in a modern setting and many of Macbeth's speeches are heard in voice-over. The production is tense, dark, and unforgiving, showing Macbeth as a murderer who has lost any capacity for remorse. The play lends itself readily to such broad and differing interpretations over the centuries because Shakespeare has taken great care in creating a character who is not only multifaceted, but also multidimensional. Whether a director, a critic, or a student of the play chooses only one of Macbeth's many characteristics as a main point of interest, it is never completely possible to define Macbeth in concrete terms. The play's text may remain constant, but Macbeth, the King and killer, has the ability to speak to all times and all cultures.


Essays: Macbeth: Victim of Historians

The Tragedy of Macbeth is undoubtedly one of the darkest portraits of a villain that Shakespeare could have written. Macbeth is without any redeeming qualities whatsoever, as he and his venomous Queen murder their way to the throne of Scotland, before revenge and insanity take their toll. Is it possible that the people of Scotland would have tolerated such an ignoble pair? As experience has taught, trying to understand British history from Shakespeare's history plays is a wasted effort, since the playwright was in the business of filling his playhouse with plays that people would pay to see. Naturally, he would take an incident and turn it into a spell-binding yarn to satisfy the patrons. If this is so, then it is necessary to look at Macbeth as he appears in history to find out if he really was all that bad or is a victim of the historians and the playwright.

If, like Shakespeare, we depend on 16th century historians, we get a limited view of Macbeth. The truth is that these writers produced their histories some 500 years after the death of Macbeth, and Shakespeare's play was almost 600 years later in 1606. In order to get a more accurate picture of Macbeth, his Queen, and their reign, we must go back to the 11th century and seek contemporary accounts. FN1

Archaeological information from the 11th century is scant at best, with only one axe head being extant in Great Britain. There are no potteries, jewellery, or coins to help, but there is a piece of Gaelic poetry, "The Prophecy of Bierken", which gives a physical description of Macbeth. The poem says that Macbeth was a 'furious red king' (meaning he had a ruddy complexion) and that he had flowing blonde hair, both contradictions to the traditional casting for an actor in the role.

The actual Macbeth was not a thane (or local magistrate), but a warlord who ruled in the Scottish Highlands as the Mowmar of Murray, effectively a mini-kingdom. This kingdom was very important to King Duncan because of its strategic position between the English Northumbrians who threatened Scotland from the South and the Viking raiders who lived in the North. Macbeth, however, did not have an easy succession to the mowmarship. His cousin killed Macbeth's father when Macbeth was a teenager and took control of Murray. In 1035, Macbeth burned his cousin and fifty of his followers alive, taking back Murray and marrying his cousin's widow, Gruagh. Macbeth's wife is the first Queen to be named in Scottish history and was a member of the royal line as Duncan's aunt. Her marriage to Macbeth was probably a political arrangement that benefited them both. She was a good woman who generously funded and gave land to the Caudies monks who transcribed manuscripts on an island in Loch Levlan, Fife. As a royal relative to Duncan and a link to Kenneth I, Gruagh enhanced Macbeth's status and reputation.

The actual Macbeth was well versed in warfare. In addition to regaining Murray, he did take part in the defeat of the Norwegian lord, Svend Estridsen or Sweno at Torfness. Although not solid evidence of this particular battle, 'Sueno's Stone', discovered in the 19th century, stands near Forres, Scotland, Macbeth's home in the play. The stone depicts excessive carnage, such as severed heads and decapitated bodies, which gives a good idea of what warfare was like in Macbeth's day. The stone, however, does not tell us that the 'battles' were actually skirmishes that lasted only about thirty minutes. The 'armies' were small bands of men from the land that Macbeth ruled. He may have worn protective armour for the battle, but his poor soldiers would have only had swords, spears, or axes with which to defend themselves. These skirmishes were not 'little' in their intensity, violence, or bloodshed. The swords, spears, and axes were designed to kill, and if they did not, they left the receiver of their blows horribly maimed or totally disabled.

As such a great warrior, did Macbeth actually kill Duncan? To understand what happened, we must understand something of the political process in Scotland at the time. In selecting a king, the system of tanistry was 'a royal kin group electoral college system'. FN2 It meant that, unlike today when the oldest male child succeeds his father (primogeniture), the king could be elected from anywhere in the male royal line. There were two branches of the royal line descending from Kenneth Macalpine, or Kenneth I. Over the years,
the election of the king had rotated from one branch to the other. Malcolm II decided unilaterally to change the system and since he had no sons, named his grandson, Duncan, heir to the throne, in an effort to establish primogeniture over tanistry in Scotland.

That Macbeth killed Duncan is documented in several sources, but there is question about how Duncan died. Some sources say he was fatally wounded in a battle with Macbeth at Pitgavaney. According to a historian writing twenty years after the death of Macbeth, Malebrichter the Hermit, Macbeth killed Duncan at the Hass of the Blacksmith, and that the King died at Elden Cathedral. Macbeth in killing Duncan restored the tanistry system by force, and in the Scottish view, was justified in doing so. Macbeth's claim, however, could not be ratified until he sat on the Stone of Destiny.

This stone was the traditional place of installing a new king. It had been in Westminster Abbey, London, until it was recently returned to Scotland and is now kept with the Scottish crown jewels in Edinburgh Castle. At the time of Duncan's assassination, the stone was kept in the Abbey Church at Scone. Macbeth would, as in the play, have had to go to Scone, where after a bard had recited the long list of fifty-seven Scottish kings, he would have been presented with a sword to protect his people. Crowning the king was a much later ritual. Becoming king in his early 30s, Macbeth was a good ruler, generous and fair. He travelled throughout a united Scotland that was wealthy, safe, and secure. In 1050, Macbeth made a pilgrimage to Rome, a trip he would never have undertaken if there had been any unrest in Scotland. According to Professor Ted Cowan of Glasgow University, the purpose of this trip may have been 'to bind Scotland more closely' to the European Church.

Other characters that affect Macbeth in the play, such as Macduff, Banquo, and the witches, were added much later. In 1590-1591, the North Berwick witch case was much discussed. Dozens of witches, whom James VI questioned himself, had planned to destroy him through witchcraft. In addition, Dr. David Caldwell of the National Museums of Scotland thinks that it is possible that Shakespeare was poking fun at Scottish cooking. Since Scots are fond of soups, porridge (oatmeal), and boiled meats cooked in large pots, the playwright has the witches mix up a most vile brew in the cauldron. The truth about the witches is that more were burned in the 17th century than any other period. In 12th century Scotland, the Church had no desire to confront old gods or traditional beliefs. It was the practice to incorporate them into religious events or to dismiss them as nonsense.

In addition to the fascination with witches and their craft, Macbeth is drawn in a stereotypical fashion that agreed with 16th century writers. In about 1547, Andrew Boorde, a doctor living and practising in Glasgow, wrote:

I Am a Scotyshe man, and trew I am to Fraunce;
In every countrty, myself I do avancce;
I wyll boost myselfe, I will crake and face;
I love to be exalted, here and evry place.
an Englyshe man I cannot naturally love,
Wherefore I offend them, and my lord above…
I am a Scottyshe man, and have dissembled muche,
and in my promise I have not kept touche.
Great morder and theft in tymes past I have used… FN3

This picture of the Scots as boastful allies to England's enemy, France, with no regard for the codes of gentlemanly behaviour, can be found in many extant documents. Even today in England, there is a great divide between the northern and southern sections of the country: the North is supposedly violent and uneducated, while the South is presumably the opposite. As with all prejudices, this bias was and is irrational, but does contain an element of truth.
Because of northern Scotland's rugged terrain and unpredictably harsh weather patterns, the Highlanders, or Celts, tended to focus on survival. They organised themselves into clans and conducted themselves according to strict codes of honour which the English could not comprehend and which were foreign to their sensibilities. Scottish amusements were seen as inferior to the theatre which thrived in England. The portrait of the Scotsman as an uncivilised barbarian capable of human cruelty and violence may have been a myth, but it is a myth in which Macbeth the man is shrouded.

As for Macbeth's overthrow, Malcolm began his campaign for the revenge of his father's death in 1054. There actually was a battle at Dunsinane on the 27 July 1054, and Macbeth was defeated. But he escaped with his family to his Highlands stronghold, Lumphanon. Malcolm rushed to Scone to be ratified as King, but Macbeth was still alive. This meant that Scotland now had two kings: one in the South, one in the North. On 14 August 1057, seventeen years to the day that Duncan died, Malcolm attacked and Macbeth was killed. The fall-out from the historical Macbeth's defeat was to have long lasting effects. Malcolm moved his court south and married an English princess. With this one action, he altered the course of Scotland. The country's whole orientation changed from Celtic to Anglo-Norman which meant that its Celtic roots were severed in favour of development along European lines. If Macbeth, 'the last great Celtic King of Scotland' (FN4) had survived, it is possible that Celtic Scotland may have been preserved and Scotland would be very different today.

It is Shakespeare's play that has created the majority of mythic tales that concern Macbeth. Why should the playwright write such a villain? Mindful of his eye on box office receipts, Shakespeare took his story from Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles, first published in 1577 (expanded edition, 1587) in two separate books that contained three volumes. Volumes One and Two contain the history of England before and after the conquest of William the Conqueror. Volume Two covers the history of Scotland and Ireland. It is here that the account of Macbeth's rise and reign is told, possibly drawn from other sources such as Hector Boece's Scotorum historiae (1526, 1575) and John Bellenden's translation of Boece into Scots (1540?).

According to Holinshed, Macbeth reigned for ten years during which he was a good king and met his responsibilities to his people. Holinshed, however, also described Macbeth's belief in witches and the Birnam Wood incident. Interestingly, Holinshed placed a genealogy of Scottish kings descended from Banquo in the middle of the story about Macbeth. In Holinshed, it is Lady Macbeth who has the driving ambition to usurp the throne, and it is she and Banquo who are Macbeth's co-conspirators in Duncan's murder. Holinshed is very clear that Macbeth's tenure as king was also controversial because of changes to the method of succession to the Scottish throne. As we have seen, these histories and the 'facts' they convey are suspect because of their time distance from the events. Repeatedly throughout the play, the juxtaposition of Macbeth's personal actions to his public persona is emphasised by the words 'blood' and 'bloody'. As far as his education and cultural life, he does not read in the play and only writes one letter. The only songs are those of the witches. When compared to other Shakespeare tragedies or history plays, Macbeth has a higher proportion of scenes that cannot be fixed as to place or time and apparently are outdoors. This inability to be tacked down underscores his barbarity and lack of polish. Shakespeare's possible motive for maligning this last Celtic king might have been political, to please the new King, a Scot, who had become his patron.

Furthermore, the play touches on what had been a delicate issue: succession to the throne. In Macbeth, Duncan nominates his oldest son, Malcolm, to succeed him. For Jacobean's, the recent debate about Elizabeth I's childlessness and reluctance to name an heir, and the accession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne, would have made the problem all too real.

The myths about Duncan's murder, the prophecies of the witches, and the role of Lady Macbeth in the proceedings are just that - myths. In essence, Shakespeare provided his patron and King, and the members of the audience with great entertainment at the expense of Macbeth's real place in Scottish history.

NOTES
1. The information contained in this essay draws heavily on *The Real Macbeth*, written by Tony Robinson; directed by David Willcock. Spire-Films Production for Channel Four Television Corporation, 2000. Air date 1 January 2001. All quotations are taken from this programme except where otherwise indicated. The speakers have been duly footnoted.

2. Ron Geer, Clan Duncan Museum, Scotland.


4. Prof. Ted Cowan, University of Glasgow.

**Essays: The Theme of Guilt in Macbeth**

Through the experiences of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare demonstrates that self-destructive guilt cannot be assuaged by recourse to action nor by even the most determined effort to expunge the pangs of conscience by active engagement in denial and transference. In the course of the Scottish tragedy, Macbeth repeatedly misinterprets the guilt that he suffers as being simply a specimen of fear. Consequently, his characteristic way of dealing with his guilt is to face it directly by committing still more misdeeds, and this, of course, only generates further shame. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, is fully cognizant of the basic difference between fear and guilt, and she attempts to preclude the onset of the latter by first denying her own sense of conscience and then by focusing her attention upon the management of Macbeth's guilt. These acts of internal repression do not work, and, once her husband has departed to the field of combat and she is left alone, Lady Macbeth assumes the very manifestations of guilt that have been associated with Macbeth. Yet in *Macbeth*, we are furnished with several examples of how remorse can be addressed, most notably in Macduff's response to the slaughter of his wife and children. Therefore, while Shakespeare show us that feelings of guilt can unleash self-destructive drives, he also teaches us that it is the way in which we cope with guilt which is determinative of its ultimate effects.

A warrior by vocation, Macbeth is accustomed to overcoming self-doubts by confronting his fears with sword in hand. When thoughts of slaying Duncan to obtain the crown first enter his mind, Macbeth's concern is that they not be detected. Hence, he proclaims, "Stars, hide your fires/Let not light see my black and deep desires," (I, v, 11.58-59), and, when on the cusp of crime, he again calls on nature to mask his motives, entreating the earth, "Hear not my steps which way they walk" (II, i, 11.65-66). As a man of action, Macbeth is convinced that if only he can hide his crime and further the prophecy given to him by the witches, his ill feelings will naturally dissipate. This belief underlies his reaction to the murderer's news that Fleance has escaped the fate which Macbeth planned for him. Learning of this flaw in the execution of his scheme, Macbeth laments: "Then comes my fit again. I had else been perfect; Whole as the marble" (III, iv, 11.25-26). For Macbeth, the reason that the ghost of Banquo appears at the feast, then, is that the loose end of Fleance's remaining alive has left him "cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in to saucy doubts and fears" (III, iv, 11.30-31). Finally, in his encounter with Malcolm, Macbeth uses the crutch of the prediction that no man born of woman can harm him to buckle his courage, for that being so, "The mind I sway by and the heart I bear/Shall never sag with doubt nor shake with fear" (V, ii, 11.9-10). Consistently, Macbeth construes his mental problem as one of grappling with fear. We realize, of course, that it is not cowardice, but the operation of guilt that drives Macbeth toward his tragic end. After all, Macbeth has displayed almost superhuman courage on the field of battle. But Macbeth remains blind to this, and comes to believe that the mental torture he is experiencing is rooted in some external threat.

It is this misinterpretation of guilt as fear which explains Macbeth's assumption of the role of plotter from his wife following the murder of the king. We recall that the scheme to dispatch with Duncan is spawned by Lady
Macbeth, and that she is only able to enlist her husband's participation in the murder by implying that he is a
coward. Macbeth counters this charge by killing Duncan once he has "screwed up his courage," and,
thereafter, he takes the leading part in orchestrating still more misdeeds, including the use of hirings to
assassinate Banquo and, later, the family of Macduff. Indeed, having proven his mettle to himself by slaying
Duncan, Macbeth deliberately keeps his intention to complete the crime by ordering the deaths of Banquo and
Fleance from his wife, telling her, "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck/Till thou applaud the deed"
(III, ii, 11.50-51). It is significant that immediately after his vision of Banquo's ghost, Macbeth's mind is
drawn to the external problem of Macduff's suspicions. Hearing that Macduff has left for England, Macbeth
propounds that, "From this moment/The very firstlings of my heart shall be/The firstlings of my hand" (IV, i,
165-67). As the play unfolds, Macbeth remains under the impression that what bothers him is not the
psychological impact of his past crimes, but his failure to conduct still more carnage, that is, his inability to
grapple with fear and do what must be done to vanquish its inhibitory power.

In contrast to her consort, Lady Macbeth knows well in advance of Duncan's murder that her participation in
the crime will expose her to the ravages of guilt. Thus, in an oft-cited speech, she conjures supernatural forces
to transmute her into a being shorn of conscience.

Come you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood;
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between
The effect and it (I, v, 11.44-51).

This invocation embodies a shortcoming which will prove to have ironic consequences. We note that while
Lady Macbeth implores the spirits to relieve her of those pangs of guilt which might deter the accomplishment
of her purpose, she does not extend the "spell" beyond the commission of the crime. Lady Macbeth believes
that the prospective remorse which she faces is an obstacle to the plot which she has hatched to gain the
throne, but she does not consider the possibility that guilt might reverberate after Duncan has been slain. This
view is reinforced when she herself contemplates stabbing Duncan in his sleep, but refrains from doing so
because he resembles her father.

With Duncan's death, the potentially negative effects of guilt are denied by Lady Macbeth, for, after all, in her
conception, guilt is only a problem insofar as it stands as a barrier to attainment, having no substantive
consequences once this initial hurdle has been overcome. Having denied the after-effects of guilt, Lady
Macbeth's subconscious method for coping with it is to concentrate on the symptoms of guilt which arise in
her husband. In the wake of his crime, Macbeth hears that internal voice which commands him to "sleep no
more" (II, ii, 11.50-51). Restive to the end, Macbeth's insomnia is noted by his wife, and she attempt to
explain the more vivid and horrifying experiences that he undergoes, such as seeing Banquo's spectral effigy
at the feast, by referring to natural causes, telling her husband that his vision stems from the fact that he lacks
"the season of all'natures, sleep" (III, iv, 1.73). In the scene which occurs immediately after Duncan's death,
Lady Macbeth orders her husband to get some water "and wash this filthy witness from your hand" (II, ii,
11.61-62). He rejects her suggestion, crying out, "What hands are here. Hal they pluck out mine eyes!/Will all
great Neptune's ocean wash this blood/Clean from my hand?" (II, ii, 11.77-79). She, in turn, insists that the
tell-tale signs of his crime cannot be seen by others, that "a little water clears us of this deed" (II, ii, 1.85). For
Lady Macbeth, then, the means through which she responds to the guilt that besets her is to concentrate on her
husband's irrational behavior lest it betray their common part in perfidy.
The innate limitations of Lady Macbeth's way of managing her own guilt by bolstering Macbeth become plain in the play's final act. As the gentleman informs the doctor who has been called to cure her insomnia, Lady Macbeth only begins to sleepwalk and to compulsively wash her hands when Macbeth is no longer present, the tyrant having taken to the field to stop Malcolm, Macduff, and their fellows from overturning his reign. Indeed, as the doctor and the gentleman observe her actions, Lady Macbeth seems caught in the routine of assuring Macbeth that he has no cause for fear, as she speaks the lines: "Wash your hands, put on your night gown/Look not so pale. I tell you yet again/Banquo's buried. He cannot come out on's grave" (V, i, 11.56-57). At this juncture, Lady Macbeth has so suppressed her own feelings of guilt that she can only address them indirectly, resorting to an imagined effort to calm her husband. The problem, of course, is that Macbeth is not there to divert her attention from her own sense of guilt, and she must therefore confront a state of mind which her narrow understanding of guilt as a deterrent to action cannot accommodate.

Although both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth suffer irrevocably from the torment of guilt, throughout the play we are presented with characters who experience guilt but nonetheless deal with it effectively. The first of these is the erstwhile Thane of Cawdor. On the execution block, Macbeth's predecessor takes active measures to alleviate his soul of the guilt of rebellion. It is reported of him to Duncan, "That very frankly he confessed his treasons/Implored your highness' pardon, and set forth a deep repentance" (I, iv, 11.5-7). The insurgent Thane, then, acknowledges his crime, begs the forgiveness of its target, and expresses his regret. Similarly, it is by disclosing his shortcomings to Macduff that Malcolm frees himself of his feelings that he will prove a greater tyrant on the throne than Macbeth and is able to abjure "the taints and blames laid upon myself" (IV, iii, 1.138). But the most important example of how guilt can be overcome is that of Macduff. Apprised that his family has been killed by Macbeth's henchmen, Macduff is urged by Malcolm to "dispute it like a man" (IV, iii, 11.257). He agrees on the need to exact vengeance upon Macbeth, but tells the prince, "I shall do so/But I must also feel it as a man" (IV, iii, 11.258-259). Macduff then remonstrates with himself, acknowledging that he has been "sinful" in the sense that his innocent wife and children were slain for his opposition to Macbeth. Yet once this guilt is openly acknowledged, Macduff is able to move toward the final confrontation with Macbeth in a deliberate and highly focused manner, refusing to strike down the reluctant soldiers in Macbeth's force and seeking his revenge on Macbeth alone.

In \textit{Macbeth}, Shakespeare reminds us that sin and accompanying guilt is ubiquitous, and warns us of the dire consequences of an uneasy conscience. At the same time, in Macduff and in other figures in the play, Shakespeare shows us that guilt can be overcome when it is recognized as such. Plainly, neither Macbeth nor Lady Macbeth rises to this task. Macbeth attempts to substitute fear for guilt and to deal with it through action, while his wife acknowledges the debilitating effect of guilt she constricts it into a deterrent, using the management of her husband's guilt as a means for diverting her attention away from her own sense of shame. Both of these courses prove ruinous, and, at bottom, the depth of tragedy which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth undergo stems not from their heinous deeds alone, but from their inability to accept the guilt that issues from their crimes.

\section*{Essays: Lady Macbeth: A Liberated Woman?}

The question of Lady Macbeth's degree of liberation may be seen from two opposing viewpoints. If we define a "liberated woman" as one who has found her own strength, one who is able to function independently of the traditional subservient roles, Lady Macbeth clearly does not fit. She defines herself, and is defined by others, as a wife to Macbeth. Her ambitions are for him, and she willingly places herself in a secondary position in their relationship. She acknowledges his primary social position and his superior physical strength, and does not attempt to compete with him.

She functions flawlessly as the "woman of the house", the mistress of the castle, the hostess. On the other hand, a case could be made for the fact that Lady Macbeth struggles with what she defines as her own
feminine nature's weakness, and overcomes that weakness long enough to participate in the bloody murders. We first meet Lady Macbeth as she reads the news of the witches' prophecies. With a grim determination she resolves to make the promises come true. Her motivation is clearly her husband's hesitant nature:

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be
What thou art promis'd: yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full of the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition; but without
The illness should attend it.
(Act I, Scene v.)

Realizing that she will have to be the prime mover of the plot to murder Duncan, Lady Macbeth prayers for the spirits to "unsex" her, to be given freedom from any interference by her natural feminine gentility. She renounces compunction and remorse, which she recognizes to be her own natural responses. Ironically, however, after the murder, it is the seemingly steely-natured Lady Macbeth who begins to capitulate to the first onslaughts of an uneasy conscience:

These deeds must not be thought
After these ways; so, it will make us mad.
(Act II, Sc. i)

As the play progresses it becomes more and more clear that Lady Macbeth is not able to put aside the natural feminine components of her psyche. She errs, it seems, in defining her delicacy in such matters as weakness. She is clearly not a liberated woman because she feels that in order to be strong she must deny her womanliness. Unable to reconcile her own ambivalence, she moves in a steady progression to those fateful moments of insanity which lead to her death. She first fears madness and then experiences overwhelming guilt:

Naught's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content:
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy,
Than, by destruction, dwell in doubtful joy.
(Act III, Sc. ii)

In the banquet scene, wherein Macbeth is haunted by the ghost of the murdered Banquo, Shakespeare further advances Lady Macbeth's collapse. Consistent with her role as wife and hostess, she skillfully saves her husband's honor by dismissing the company before the stricken Macbeth is carried further into hallucination. She has always played the role of wife very well - at his side, coaching and coaxing. But after the departure of the guests, it is evident that she has changed. Her tirade of the first act in which she persuaded Macbeth to murder Duncan finds no parallel here. Instead of scornful anger, Lady Macbeth speaks in brief sentences to her husband words which suggest resignation rather than castigation. At this moment in the play Lady Macbeth is perhaps most herself.

In the last act of the play, driven by a conscience that would try to usurp its own gentle nature, Lady Macbeth wanders through the castle in her sleep, reliving the horror of Duncan's murder. Her final lines in the scene suggest both the horror and the pitiable spectacle of a woman who wanted too much, not solely for herself, but for the man she loves:

Wash your hands, put on your nightgown; look not so pale: - I tell you yet again, Banquo'a buried; he cannot come out on's grave....To bed, to bed; there's knocking at the gate: come,
come, come, come, give me your hand: what's done cannot be undone: to bed, to bed, to bed.
(Act V, Sc.1)

There is the sharpness of the stronger woman contrasted with the brooding terror of the conscience-stricken which makes these moments so memorable. We are reminded of the ambitious woman who scoffed at her husband's bravery in order to prod him into action; It is the Lady Macbeth who had to take control of the situation at the peak of its danger; it is the wife who had to lead her husband with threats and encouragement through the murderous ritual. At the same time, Shakespeare presents a touching picture of a woman who has been destroyed by her daring disruption of her own sensitive nature. She is the one who finally breaks; she is the stricken, weaker partner.

In the course of the play Macbeth and Lady Macbeth reverse their positions. Macbeth grows from a reasonable and loyal nobleman to a tyrannically murderous despot. Lady Macbeth first appears to us to be a woman who is struggling to overcome her feminine delicacy, then succeeds, and then fails. Her initial cruelty seems born of the desperation of the moment, rather than a basic element within her nature. In times of crisis, someone must be strong; she is that one. Even Macbeth connects this burst of violence from Lady Macbeth with the emergence of a masculine side of her personality, although he states it in terms of her female reproductive capabilities:

Bring forth men-children only;
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males.
(Act I, Scene vii)

A further point should be made regarding Lady Macbeth as a liberated woman. Shakespeare makes it quite clear that the marriage relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is a cornerstone of the tragedy. As the events of the play unfold, Macbeth and his wife are swept apart by the consequences of their action. She becomes guilt-ridden and inactive while he lusts for more confirmed power, thereby becoming his own driving force. Earlier, however, it was not so. They loved each other and respected the mutuality of their marriage vows. The tragedy of Macbeth is greatly enhanced by the realization that, for all practical purposes, love brought dishonor and death to both. Their lives as loving partners in the early part of the play reminds us of the essential humanity, and therefore, fallibility of these people. Without the background of these qualities, Macbeth and his Lady seem barbarically cruel.

Thus, while arguments might be made that Lady Macbeth attempted too be a "liberated woman", it seems clear that she was not. She functioned best in her role of wife. Her attempts to find strength in cruelty, in a denial of her own feminine nature, ended in disaster. The truly liberated woman finds strength in recognizing and nurturing her own natural qualities, not in denying them or in attempting to act like a man. Indeed, Lady Macbeth seems to confuse strength, bravery, cruelty and masculinity: "When you durst do it, then you were a man;" (I,vii) she replies when Macbeth insists that he dares "do all that may become a man".

In the final analysis, Lady Macbeth is not liberated. She is, in fact, a prisoner of her own misdeeds and of her own guilty conscience. When she invoked the spirits to "Come to my woman's breasts/ And take my milk for gall" (I,v), she did not know that that gall would ultimately poison her. The only liberation, ultimately, for Lady Macbeth, is death.

**Essays: The Guilt of Lady Macbeth**

Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's moat fascinating creations. One immediately reacts to her image as if all the forces of cunning and heartlessness in the universe combined to form the prototype of the femme
fatale. And yet, upon examination of the character as she speaks in the play, one is drawn to the conclusion that there is more of the woman and wife than of the witch about her.

The reader first meets Lady Macbeth as she reads the news of the witches’ salutations and prophecies. With a grim determination she resolves to make the promises of the black sisters come true. It is interesting to note, however, that her motivation is clearly her husband’s hesitant nature:

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be
What thou art promis’d: yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full of the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition; but without
The illness should attend it. (Act I, sc. v)

Realizing that she is to be the prime mover of the plot to murder Duncan, Lady Macbeth intones a prayer:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here;
And fill me, from the crown to the top, top-full
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood,
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature –
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it! (Act I, Sc. v)

The prayer uses most specific images which suggest that Lady Macbeth is not a coldly calculating predator. She wishes to be unsexed, to be given freedom from any semblance of feminine gentility; she renounces compunction and remorse, rather delicate terms which suggest a thoughtful, conscientious nature. In other words, Lady Macbeth is not going to allow herself to be dissuaded by those taunts of conscience which trouble her husband during the early stages of their plotting. Ironically, however, after the murder, it is the seemingly steely-natured wife who begins to capitulate to the first onslaughts of an uneasy conscience:

These deeds must not be thought
After these ways; so, it will make us mad. (Act II, Sc.i)

From the haunting similarity between the sleeping Duncan and her own father, Lady Macbeth moves in a steady progression to those fateful moments of insanity which lead to her death. Along the way, as is evident in the above quotation, she first fears madness, and then experiences the emptiness of their triumph and a palpable guilt:

Naught’s had, all’s spent,
Where our desire is got without content:
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy,
Than, by destruction, dwell in doubtful joy. (Act III, Sc. ii)

In the banquet scene, wherein Macbeth is haunted by the ghost of the murdered Banquo, Shakespeare further advances Lady Macbeth's collapse. Consistent with earlier behavior, she skillfully saves her husband's honor by dismissing the company before the stricken Macbeth is carried further into hallucination. She has always been on his side, strongly coaching and coaxing. But after the departure of the guests, it is evident that she has changed. Her tirade of the first act wherein she persuaded her lord to consider Duncan's murder finds no parallel here—and it certainly calls for a cautionary rebuke. Instead of scornful anger, Lady Macbeth speaks
in brief sentences to her husband words which suggest resignation rather than castigation. It is an interesting and touching moment in the tragedy.

The unfortunate woman makes her next appearance in the last act of the play. Driven by a conscience that would try to usurp its own gentle nature, Lady Macbeth wanders through the castle in her sleep, reliving the horror of Duncan's murder. Her final lines in the scene suggest both that horror and the pitiable spectre of a woman who wanted too much for the man she loved:

Wash your hands, put on your nightgown; look not so pale—I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on's grave. To bed, to bed; there's knocking at the gate: come, come, come, come, give me your hand: what's done cannot be undone: to bed, to bed, to bed. (Act V, Sc. i)

There is the sharpness of the stronger woman contrasted with the brooding terror of the victimized conscience that makes these moments some of the most memorable in the play. The reader is reminded of the ambitious woman who scoffed at her husband's bravery in order to prod him into action; it is Lady Macbeth who had to take control of the situation at the peak of its danger, it is the wife who had to lead her husband with threats and encouragement through the murderous ritual. And, at the same time, Shakespeare is presenting a marvelously touching picture of a woman who has been destroyed by her daring disruption of her own sensitive nature. She is the one who must be led away now; she is the stricken, weaker member.

During the course of the tragedy, both protagonists cross paths, so to speak. Macbeth grows from a reasonable, loyal nobleman to a tyrannically murderous despot. He abandons morality after weighing all sides. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, plunges directly into the fray. She boldly prays not to let her own good instincts blunt, even for one moment, the fierce determination she must effect to achieve her desired ends. Only gradually does human nature assert itself in her character. And when it does, the burden of guilt proves too much for her mind. She becomes the moral recluse while her husband continues his struggle for conquest and power.

Viewed in this light, the character of Lady Macbeth becomes more understandable and certainly much more convincing. Her cruelty seems born of the desperation of the moment rather than a basic element within her nature. In times of crisis, someone must always be strong; she is that one. Unfortunately, her strength achieves tragic dimension.

One other point which perhaps has not been made as evident as it might be is the relationship that exists between husband and wife. It is, after all, the cornerstone of the tragedy. As the events of the play unfold, Macbeth and his wife are swept apart by the consequences of their action. She becomes guilt-ridden and inactive while he lusts for more confirmed power, thereby becoming his own driving force. Earlier, however, it was not so. They loved each other and respected the mutuality of their marriage vows. The tragedy of Macbeth is greatly enhanced by the realization that, for all practical purposes, love brought dishonor and death to both. Their lives as loving partners in the early part of the play reminds us of the essential humanity, and therefore, fallibility of these people. And, in point of fact, discarding the gory particulars, one feels in this tale of ambition run amuck a mythic tone which suggests success and happiness are perhaps man’s greatest trials.

**Essays: The Witches in Macbeth**

Throughout *Macbeth* there exists confusion as to what is real and what imaginary, and, for the most part, it is Macbeth himself who is confronted with these confusions. The question of whether or not the witches are real must be examined in relation to them.
The Weird Sisters always appear in thunder and either vanish mysteriously or are swallowed up in a mist. They play a prophetic role, and, at the beginning of the play, inform the audience that they are to meet with Macbeth. From the beginning, then, their existence outside of the imaginings of any of the other characters, is established. The witches appear in scenes where no other characters are present, and therefore can be seen to have an independent existence.

On their first encounter with other characters, the Weird Sisters are seen not only by Macbeth, but by Banquo, too. The latter, unsure as to their form, asks whether they are spirits, proclaiming that they do not look like "inhabitants o’ th’ earth," (I.iii. 41.) Both Banquo and Macbeth take the prophecies of the witches seriously, though not comprehending the nature of the three. Banquo demands of them whether not they are imaginary. Macbeth knows that they will disappear with the thickening mist, and when they do, comments that "wat seemed corporal, melted,/ As breath into the wind." (I.iii.81-2) Once they have vanished, Banquo questions whether he and his companion have been subject to an illusion:

Were such things as do speak about?
Or have we eaten on the insane root
That takes the reason prisoner? (I. iii. 83-5)

If the Witches were not real, then they can only have existed in the imagination of himself and Macbeth. But, considering the prophetic nature of the words conveyed, it would seem that the Witches should be credited with some existence of their own.

Banquo links them with the devil, calling then the "instruments of darkness," (I. iii. 124) while Macbeth alludes to "supernatural soliciting." (I. 111. 130) In his case, the appearance of the witches has lent his imagination — which had been considering murder, to gain the positions the witches endowed him with — a greater degree of reality.

When the dagger appears to Macbeth he immediately questions its reality, being more unsure of its real existence than he is of that of the witches. As with the witches, the appearance of the dagger reflects the thoughts in his mind, for he had been contemplating murder with the use of such a weapon. Macbeth can definitely conclude, though, that "There's no such thing," (ll.i.47) he has imagined the existence of the dagger, which appeared only to him.

Following the murder of Duncan, Macbeth is again disturbed by a phenomenon that only he is the subject of: he hears voices accusing him of his crime. Lady Macbeth must reassure him that his imagination is responsible, for he is thinking too much of his deed.

When the ghost of Banquo appears and sits in Macbeth's seat, it is again only the latter who can see it. Lady Macbeth both equates his "vision" with that of the dagger, which she explains as products of his imagination, stemming from fear. Macbeth, however, believes the ghost of Banquo is real. When it appears a second time, he is afraid and calls it imaginary, an “Unreal mock'ry.” (III.iv.107) However, when the ghost disappears, and he is himself again, he believes in its reality and cannot understand why his guests can remain calm. The apparition appeared to him without his instigation. Yet, he can summons the witches to appear before him, arranging a meeting with them to gain further knowledge about the events of the future.

Later, Hecate shows her disapproval of the witches’ actions, and threatens to conjure up genuine apparitions to confuse Macbeth. She, too, grants the Weird Sisters an independent existence.

Confusion as to their reality arises from the means by which the witches appear and disappear. In the cavern scenes, they arise from the flames of the cauldron, and again disappear without trace.
The witches would seem to be real in that Macbeth can converse with them and question them, whereas the
ghost of Banquo, which was projected from his imagination, did not speak to him. Neither do the apparitions,
which the witches conjure up, have the ability to answer his questions. They may only repeat their warnings to
him.

Whereas other "visions" in Macbeth bear direct relation to the King’s guilt, having reference only to his
thoughts and actions, and appearing only to Macbeth, the witches represent more than this limited aspect of
evil; they also refer to killings outside of Macbeth's mind and actions. They make reference to deeds they have
done which do not touch the King, nor the events of the play. The ambiguity that is maintained as to their real
form, seems to indicate that it is not even necessary to establish whether or not they are real; it is enough that
they perform the function of representing evil and prophesying future events. They are not completely of the
earth, demonstrating supernatural qualities.

Macbeth believes in the reality of the witches, and the fact that he sends for information — which he receives
— as to their nature, confirms their existence outside of his imagination. He knows where to gain information
about them, and where to find them when he needs their assistance.

The whole play is concerned with unnatural acts and the chaos that necessarily results, in the world of man,
and in nature. The natural order of things is overturned, and what was previously thought impossible, becomes
the reality. The doubtful existence of the witches reinforces this theme; they help to illustrate the
predominating evil, presenting not only Macbeth’s evil, but that existing all through the world. This wider role
helps to establish them, however, outside of the imagination of Banquo and Macbeth.

**Critical Essays: Macbeth**

MACBETH opens after the victory of Macbeth and Banquo, two Scottish generals, over rebels against the
crown. Three witches appear and greet Banquo as the ancestor of kings and Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor and
“king hereafter.”

Emboldened by these prophecies and urged on by his wife, Macbeth murders Duncan, his king and kinsman,
while Duncan is a guest in his home. After Macbeth is proclaimed king, he decides to forestall the prophecy
of the witches by murdering Banquo’s family. Haunted by Banquo’s ghost, Macbeth awakens the suspicions
of Macduff, who flees the country.

Warned by the witches to beware of Macduff, Macbeth proceeds to murder Macduff’s family. He feels secure
since the witches promise him that he will not be vanquished by anyone of woman born, nor will he be
defeated until “Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill” has come.

Lady Macbeth becomes insane and commits suicide. The enemy troops cut down Birnam trees to use as
camouflage. Revealing that he was delivered in a Caesarian operation and so not of woman born, Macduff
confronts the usurper Macbeth in combat. Macduff wins the battle and brandishes Macbeth’s head on a sword.
Duncan’s son Malcolm is proclaimed king.

Shakespeare’s dramatic mastery is fully mature in MACBETH. Even though Macbeth trespasses against the
standards of human decency, he successfully claims our interest and understanding, his despair evokes our
sympathy.

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**Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation**

*Macbeth* not only is the shortest of William Shakespeare’s great tragedies but also is anomalous in some structural respects. Like *Othello, the Moor of Venice* (pr. 1604, pb. 1622) and only a very few other Shakespearean plays, *Macbeth* is without the complications of a subplot. Consequently, the action moves forward in a swift and inexorable rush. More significantly, the climax—the murder of Duncan—takes place very early in the play. As a result, attention is focused on the various consequences of the crime rather than on the ambiguities or moral dilemmas that had preceded and occasioned it.

In this, the play differs from *Othello*, where the hero commits murder only after long plotting, and from *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (pr. c. 1600-1601, pb. 1603), where the hero spends most of the play in moral indecision. *Macbeth* is more like *King Lear* (pr. c. 1605-1606, pb. 1608), where destructive action flows from the central premise of the division of the kingdom. However, *Macbeth* differs from that play, too, in that it does not raise the monumental, cosmic questions of good and evil in nature. Instead, it explores the moral and psychological effects of evil in the life of one man. For all the power and prominence of Lady Macbeth, the drama remains essentially the story of the lord who commits regicide and thereby enmeshes himself in a complex web of consequences.

When Macbeth first enters, he is far from the villain whose experiences the play subsequently describes. He has just returned from a glorious military success in defense of the Crown. He is rewarded by the grateful Duncan, with preferment as thane of Cawdor. This honor, which initially qualifies him for the role of hero,
ironically intensifies the horror of the murder Macbeth soon commits.

Macbeth’s fall is rapid, and his crime is more clearly a sin than is usually the case in tragedy. It is not mitigated by mixed motives or insufficient knowledge. Moreover, the sin is regicide, an action viewed during the Renaissance as exceptionally foul, since it struck at God’s representative on Earth. The sin is so boldly offensive that many have tried to find extenuation in the impetus given Macbeth by the witches. However, the witches do not control behavior in the play. They are symbolic of evil and prescient of crimes that are to come, but they neither encourage nor facilitate Macbeth’s actions. They are merely a poignant external symbol of the ambition that is already within Macbeth. Indeed, when he discusses the witches’ prophecy with Lady Macbeth, it is clear that the possibility has been discussed before.

The responsibility cannot be shifted to Lady Macbeth, despite her goading. In a way, she is merely acting out the role of the good wife, encouraging her husband to do what she believes to be in his best interests. She is a catalyst and supporter, but she does not make the grim decision, and Macbeth never tries to lay the blame on her.

When Macbeth proceeds on his bloody course, there is little extenuation in his brief failure of nerve. He is an ambitious man overpowered by his high aspirations, yet Shakespeare is able to elicit feelings of sympathy for him from the audience. Despite the evil of his actions, he does not arouse the distaste audiences reserve for such villains as Iago and Cornwall. This may be because Macbeth is not evil incarnate but a human being who has sinned. Moreover, audiences are as much affected by what Macbeth says about his actions as by the deeds themselves. Both substance and setting emphasize the great evil, but Macbeth does not go about his foul business easily. He knows what he is doing, and his agonizing reflections show a person increasingly losing control over his own moral destiny.

Although Lady Macbeth demonstrated greater courage and resolution at the time of the murder of Duncan, it is she who falls victim to the physical manifestations of remorse and literally dies of guilt. Macbeth, who starts more tentatively, becomes stronger, or perhaps more inured, as he faces the consequences of his initial crime. The play examines the effects of evil on Macbeth’s character and on his subsequent moral behavior. The later murders flow naturally out of the first. Evil breeds evil because Macbeth, to protect himself and consolidate his position, is forced to murder again. Successfully, he kills Banquo, attempts to murder Fleance, and brutally exterminates Macduff’s family. As his crimes increase, Macbeth’s freedom seems to decrease, but his moral responsibility does not. His actions become more cold-blooded as his options disappear.

Shakespeare does not allow Macbeth any moral excuses. The dramatist is aware of the notion that any action performed makes it more likely that the person will perform other such actions. The operation of this phenomenon is apparent as Macbeth finds it increasingly easier to rise to the gruesome occasion. However, the dominant inclination never becomes a total determinant of behavior, so Macbeth does not have the excuse of loss of free will. It does, however, become ever more difficult to break the chain of events that are rushing him toward moral and physical destruction.

As Macbeth degenerates, he becomes more deluded about his invulnerability and more emboldened. What he gains in will and confidence is counterbalanced and eventually toppled by the iniquitous weight of the events he set in motion and felt he had to perpetuate. When he dies, he seems almost to be released from the imprisonment of his own evil.

**Critical Essays: Household Words: Macbeth and the Failure of Spectacle**

Lisa Hopkins, *Sheffield Hallam University*
In her epic novel on the life of Macbeth, *King Hereafter*, Dorothy Dunnett suggests that one of the primary reasons for the eventual failure of her hero's kingship is his inability to be perceived as sufficiently charismatic: 'a diverse people in time of hardship need a priest-king. The English know that. Edward is anointed with holy oil: he has the power of healing, they say'. Although Dunnett's Macbeth-figure—an Orkney jarl also known as Thorfinn—is very differently conceived from Shakespeare's, each shares an unfortunate tendency towards the mundane. Most particularly, Shakespeare's hero and his wife both, at certain crucial moments of their lives, strongly favour a low-key, occasionally almost bathetic vocabulary. This aspect of their characterization has been much mocked in the English comic and popular tradition: Bertie Wooster is continually amused by the concept of the cat i' th' adage, and Edmund Crispin's irascible literary detective Gervase Fen, Oxford professor, gives the play very short shrift:

'Do!' exclaimed Fen. 'If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly.'

'What is that supposed to mean?'

'It isn't supposed to mean anything. It's a quotation from our great English dramatist, Shakespeare. I sometimes wonder if Hemings and Condell went off the rails a bit there. It's a vile absurd jingle.'

The point was, perhaps, made most strongly, and most elegantly, by Dr Johnson, fulminating on the 'lowness' of the diction in the 'Come, thick night ...' speech (though he mistakenly attributes this to Macbeth). He castigates the use of 'an epithet now seldom heard but in the stable ... dun night may come or go without any other notice than contempt'; he rhetorically enquires, 'who, without some relaxation of his gravity, can hear of the avengers of guilt peeping through a blanket?'; and he asserts:

sentiment is weakened by the name of an instrument used by butchers and cooks in the meanest employments; we do not immediately conceive that any crime of importance is to be committed with a knife; or who does not, at least, from the long habit of connecting a knife with sordid offices, feel aversion rather than terror?

Coleridge concurred so strongly with Johnson's strictures on the inappropriateness of 'blanket' that he suggested that the reading should actually have been 'blank height'—though the quality of his engagement with the play's language in general is perhaps indicated by his remark that, '[e]xcepting the disgusting passage of the Porter, which I dare pledge myself to demonstrate an interpolation of the actors, I do not remember in *Macbeth* a single pun or play on words' (pp. 69-70).

Other responses have been less damning and more interested in teasing out the implications of the imagery. Bradley, characteristically, saw it as evidence of characterization, and (correctly attributing the speeches) believed mundanity of diction to be differentially, and deliberately, employed in the play: he suggested that Lady Macbeth 'uses familiar and prosaic illustrations' as an indication of '[t]he literalism of her mind'. More recently, Paul Jorgensen has observed that the use of the banal is not in fact confined to Lady Macbeth, but is still disposed to regard patterns of speech as symptomatic and revelatory of states of mind, commenting of the 'If it were done ...' speech that Macbeth 'is still, as in his talk with Lady Macbeth, relying upon shrinking words like *it* (four uses) and *do* (three uses)'; and Coppélia Kahn performs a similar manoeuvre when she offers a sustained and ingenious reading of Macbeth's apparently simple use of the word 'cow'. Even Coleridge was prepared to concede that some at least of the play's language might be suggestively, rather than disturbingly, 'low', commenting on 'the appropriateness of the simile "as breath" in a cold climate', and speculating that 'enkindle you unto the crown' might still further underline the play's concern with childlessness by encoding the suggestions not only of 'kind' and 'kin' but of the 'kindling', or engendering, of rabbits (p. 61).
Perhaps most interesting of all, however, are the observations of Walter Whiter on the supposedly prosaic character of the imagery. Responding silently but unmistakably to Johnson, Whiter observes:

The word 'knife' (says Mr Malone) has been objected to, as being connected with the most sordid offices; and therefore unsuitable to the great occasion on which it is employed. But, however mean it may sound to our ears, it was formerly a word of sufficient dignity, and is constantly used by Shakespeare and his contemporaries as synonymous [sic] to dagger... Blanket (Mr Malone observes) was certainly the Poet's word, and 'perhaps was suggested to him by the coarse woolen curtain of his own Theatre, through which probably, while the house was yet but half lighted, he had himself often peep'd.  

The idea that Shakespeare could have 'peep'd' through a curtain at a half-lighted Globe which he would have called a house clearly owes a very great deal more to eighteenth-century awareness of its own theatrical practices than to any historical awareness of what Elizabethan ones had been; but nevertheless I think Whiter, and Malone before him, have grasped something really central to the play here. Whiter goes on to develop his insights further, declaring that 'Nothing is more certain, than that all the images in this celebrated passage are borrowed from the Stage' (pp. 63-4) and commenting that '[t]he peculiar and appropriate dress of TRAGEDY personified is a PALL with a KNIFE' (p. 64).

In Whiter's reading, the ostensible 'lowness' of the diction is, with breathtaking ingenuity, completely recuperated in a register which allows the passage to be perceived as a sustained piece of metatheatricality. Other critics have not been slow to see similar links, ranging from Bradley's remark that Macbeth 'is generally said to be a very bad actor' to Malcolm Evans' comment that 'numerous theatrical references emerge on the "bloody stage" (II.iv.930) of Scotland in the course of the play, culminating in Macbeth's speech on "signifying nothing"'. And Christopher Pye combines elements of both these lines of critical approach, that focusing on the mundanity of the play and that focusing on its theatricality, in virtually the same breath: citing 'a foolish thought to say a sorry sight', he comments on 'the spectacular banality of Macbeth's response', but he also calls the play 'the most spectacular of Shakespeare's tragedies. Like Lady Macbeth and like the inquisitive king [James I] who watches her, Macbeth is notable for the disquieting visibility of its mysteries' (p. 145). What I want to argue, however, is that the two elements are, precisely, forced apart by the play's structure so that what we see in Macbeth is not in fact, in Pye's suggestive phrasing, 'spectacular banality', but a banality which achieves spectacularity only in metaspectacular terms—a concept which I am, I hope, going to be able to clarify.

Dr Johnson's objection to terms like 'knife' and 'blanket' was, in effect, that they were household words, representing a 'low' diction associated with 'sordid offices'. Walter Whiter counters that all these banalseeming terms have in fact another meaning in another register, in which they are associated not with the home but with the theatre, and that they are thus actually instances of elevated—and technical—terminology by their association with the classical concept of tragedy; the value-system which Whiter is implicitly working with here is clearly signalled by the typography, which italicizes Stage and uses upper case for TRAGEDY, PALL, and KNIFE. However, these theatrical meanings are accessible only on the metatheatrical or extradiegetic level: they are there to be perceived by the audience of the play, but not by its characters. We may conceive of the characters in Macbeth primarily as actors on a stage, but they, with the notable exception of Macbeth himself towards the end of his career, are presented as representations blind to their own status as representations. When Lady Macbeth speaks of knives and blankets, she, at least, can have no access to any ulterior meaning which casts them as the accoutrements of tragedy: to her, as to Dr Johnson, they are only knives and blankets, though to us, as to Walter Whiter, they may be the appropriate props of the role she plays. Moreover, Lady Macbeth is alone: if she herself does not register the metaphorical force of her words, there is no one else present to do so. This is, in fact, a consistent and striking feature of Macbeth as a whole. It may well be, as Christopher Pye terms it, 'the most spectacular of Shakespeare's tragedies', but the elements which are most obviously 'spectacular', the episodes centring on the outlandish appearance and supernatural
doings of the Weird Sisters, are (even when they are of undoubtedly Shakespearian origin) consistently staged very much for the benefit of the audience alone, and are never perceived by the majority of the characters. After their initial appearance to Macbeth and Banquo jointly, the Weird Sisters are seen only by Macbeth, and so too is the ghost of Banquo, and Lady Macbeth, for all her apostrophizings and invocations of the supernatural, never has any personal contact with it. Most other characters are even less aware than she of the presence of the diabolical and the paranormal in the play: when Malcolm gives the order for the cutting of the branches, he is adhering to a military requirement for camouflage rather than consciously fulfilling a prophecy, and it is doubtful that Macbeth's half-hints about his 'charmed-life' can convey to Macduff any sense of the extent and nature of his dealings with the Weird Sisters (indeed Macduff can refer to them, collectively, merely as an 'angel' [5.7.44]). In short, Macbeth's subjects are consistently denied any sight of the spectacles of horror that have made the play so theatrically celebrated.

This discrepancy between the experiences of Macbeth's on-stage subjects and his off-stage audience serves to reveal the ways in which Shakespeare's Macbeth shares with Dorothy Dunnett's a vulnerability to the accusation that his kingship is insufficiently charismatic and theatrical. In fact, he and Lady Macbeth are, for all their egregious brutality, in some sense the most domestic of couples, making literal and consistent use of household words. In the theatre, it may be customary to present their relationship as an explosively erotic one, but Nicholas Brooke well observes that 'no play of Shakespeare's makes so little allusion to sex'. The element of familiarity and domesticity is strongly highlighted from the very outset of the play. The Weird Sisters may have beards, live on a heath and vanish into thin air, but their conversation is notably marked by features serving to associate it with the normal concerns of women in the home: they use popular terminology like 'hurlyburly', and they discuss household animals like Greymalkin and Paddock which are, literally, familiar(s). They even talk about the weather. As with their later parodic rituals of food preparation, the alienness of the Weird Sisters is closely inscribed here within degrees of difference and inversion of the normal.

The motif of food preparation, in however distorted a form, is first signalled in the speech of the sergeant who describes the battle, when he relates how Macbeth, fighting Macdonwald, 'unseamed him from the nave to th' chops' (1.2.22). This is the first hint of the Macbeth whom Malcolm will eventually label 'this dead butcher' (5.7.99), and the epithet of butcher is applicable to him both metaphorically and literally, though the elaborate imagery and rhetorical patterning of the sergeant may tend to submerge, for the moment at least, the possibility of a literal reading. His set-piece speech, which deliberately delays the knowledge of success until he has carefully cultivated fears of uncertainty, sits well in Duncan's camp, for Duncan, as we soon learn, is marked precisely by those shows and ceremonies of kingship which will be so notably absent from the court of Macbeth. In marked contrast to the unheralded, unglossed entrance of the Weird Sisters, the sergeant is formally presented to Duncan by Malcolm, who performs a similar function when he announces the arrival of Ross to his father (1.2.45)—surely a ceremonial rather than a factual communication, unless hyper-naturalism desired a short-sighted Duncan here. Duncan, moreover, ends the scene by conferring an honour: Macbeth is to become Thane of Cawdor. The bestowal of favours and titles is a marked feature of Duncan's kingly style, and something which, we see in the closing speech, his son will also practise (could there be here an unusually favourable imaging of James I's notorious open-handedness with knighthoods and other titles?); Shakespeare had already shown in Richard III how crucial a tool this could be in retaining support. Macbeth, notably, never does this. There are no nobles of his creation, no henchmen (with the arguable exception of the Murderers) dependent entirely on his continued favour; from the time of the disrupted banquet, he converses only with those conspicuously beneath him, like the doctor, the 'loon', and Young Seyward. Here, as in other areas, there are no outward manifestations of his kingship.

Macbeth can, however, think in terms of the spectacular and the ceremonial. We see this in his first soliloquy:

(aside) Two truths are told  
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme—I thank you gentlemen—
This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good.

(1.3.128-32)

The most marked feature of his language here, however, is the dramatic register shift between his public and private discourses in the early part of the play, before horrid banquettings force disastrously together the arenas of the public and the domestic. To himself, this early Macbeth speaks stirringly, with elaborate metaphors of theatre and performance; but for public consumption, he confines himself to the plain 'I thank you gentlemen', and later apologizes, 'Give me your favour: my dull brain was wrought / With things forgotten' (1.3.150-1). A similar dualism of approach characterizes Lady Macbeth. Alone, she talks of symbolically hoarse ravens; to her servants, she speaks, like a good housewife, of preparation for the king's visit. But perhaps the most marked contrast of this type comes in Macbeth's next soliloquy:

Go bid thy mistress, when my drink is ready,
She strike upon the bell. Get thee to bed. Exit Servant.
Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand?

(2.1.32-5)

The movement from bedtime drinks to imaginary (or supernatural) daggers within the space of two lines tellingly encapsulates the contrast between Macbeth's public and private faces. In public, he is the model of bourgeois marital comfort; but in private, he—and the audience—see strange things. At the same time, though, even Macbeth's inner life displays clear elements of continuity with his outer one, for the dagger of the mind does not only represent the antithesis of the comfort and normality offered by the drink; it also comes from the same world of household objects and food, as is suggested by the lack of any noticeable register shift in the diction, with 'drink' and 'bell' giving place almost seamlessly to 'dagger' and 'hand'. The connection becomes strikingly apparent when Lady Macbeth prefigures the Weird Sisters' parodies of cooking in her preparations for the murder: she makes drinks not only for her husband but for the guards, but she has 'drugged their possets' (2.2.6); and she has 'laid their daggers ready' (2.2.12) not for a meal, but for murder. Her housewifery continues as she soothes her husband's night fears, bids him wear his nightgown (2.2.69), and, above all, adjoins him to wash his hands (2.2.45-6)—the domestic ritual that will still be with her in her madness. Her infamous cry of 'What, in our house?' (2.3.89) does not simply strike the bathetic note of her husband's 'Twas a rough night' (2.3.62); it sits perfectly with her public image as 'most kind hostess' (2.1.16). We never see Lady Macbeth out of her own house, and her mental collapse narrows even further the world we perceive her to inhabit, as we are shown her bedchamber. Bradley's comment that '[s]trange and almost ludicrous as the statement may sound, she is, up to her light, a perfect wife' could well have been extended to the argument that she is also, up to her light, a perfect house-wife. The Macbeths are, after all, so apparently innocuous that those about them are notably slow to realize the full horror of their behaviour.

Perhaps the most striking example of this emphasis on the discrepancy between the public and private lives of Macbeth, and the simultaneous, paradoxical, imbrication of both in the domestic, comes at the opening of 1.7. The scene is prefaced by an unusually detailed stage direction:

_Hautboys. Torches._
Enter a sewer and divers servants with dishes and service crossing over the stage.
_Then enter Macbeth_
This is so elaborate that Brooke elevates it to the status of formal 'dumb-show' (see note), a phenomenon without precedent in Shakespearian tragedy except in the deliberately archaic play-within-the-play in *Hamlet*, and although Brooke points out that the episode 'stresses the evening-time and the obligations of lavish hospitality' it does nothing to advance the narrative. What it does do, however, is make for a particularly startling contrast. Shakespeare brings on stage the whole panoply of the elaborately regulated ritual of the courtly serving of food; he then follows this with the very sequence of repetitive monosyllables which aroused the scorn of Gervase Fen, and which Nicholas Brooke concurs in terming 'notably plain vocabulary'.

Superficially, this inverts the contrast between private eloquence and public reticence which characterized Macbeth's earlier soliloquy; but in fact he goes on to launch himself upon one of the most sustained and dense speeches in the play, in the course of which he figures the possibility of murder, and its potential consequences, precisely in terms of food:

This even-handed justice
Commends th'ingredience of our poisoned chalice
To our own lips.

When Lady Macbeth enters, demanding 'He has almost supped: why have you left the chamber?' (1.7.29) we realize that Macbeth has, indeed, been once again neglecting his public image, causing a feast to be disrupted by his failure to attend to it fully, just as he will on the occasion of the appearance of Banquo's ghost. His wife indeed characterizes his dereliction in terms of improper banqueting when she uses the language of drunkenness and surfeit to describe it:

Was the hope drunk
Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?
And wakes it now to look so green and pale
At what it did so freely?

Typically, the one attempt at public show that the Macbeths do make revolves round cooking: they hold a ceremonial feast. Just as the murder of Duncan violated codes of hospitality, though, so too do their dinner invitations, since they demand compulsory attendance, a fact twice underlined—'Fail not our feast' says Macbeth to Banquo (3.1.27), and Lennox lists a precisely similar crime as one of the reasons for Macduff's downfall:

But peace—for from broad words, and 'cause he failed
His presence at the tyrant's feast, I hear
Macduff lives in disgrace.

Nicholas Brooke points out that in Holinshed, 'the quarrel with Macduff involves a complicated story about the building of Forres castle which Shakespeare reduced to refusal of an invitation (command) to dinner', the modification may well have been made not only in the interests of dramatic economy but because of its thematic congruence. The clear suggestion that the Macbeths are a couple at whose dinners attendance must be enforced is a powerful and compact device. It neatly measures the length of the journey they have travelled since, in the first act, Duncan deliberately solicited them as host and 'most kind hostess'. Equally, it reinforces
the images both of their customary domesticity and of its rapid disintegration, making theirs a nightmare which, even at its most outlandish, retains that most distinctive quality of what Freudian theory on the uncanny has termed the *unheimlich* by relying for its full horror on the distortion of the traditional comforts of home. It is little wonder that the Lord who converses with Lennox should figure the rule of Macbeth precisely in terms of the subversion of the domestic:

> with Him above  
> To ratify the work—we may again  
> Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights,  
> Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives.

(4.1.32-6)

Macbeth has not only murdered sleep, he has also perverted the proper consumption of food.

As well as Macduff's decision to boycott it (which in itself ironically recalls Macbeth's earlier failure to attend his own feast, for suggestively similar political reasons), the grand banquet is also devastatingly upstaged by its near-homonym Banquo, the name that we might always have guessed would lurk within the word in this instance, who, is, suggestively, imaged by Macbeth almost in terms of a distasteful food item: 'Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold' (3.4.95). The disastrous feast is a common enough feature of Renaissance drama, but it is particularly appropriate in the Macbeths' case, especially since the next time we see Macbeth it is at an eerily similar occasion, the brewing of the Weird Sisters' hell stew, with its foul concoction of ingredients, for 'a devil's-banqueting'. As with so much in the play, however, the cause of the occasion's failure is never apparent to the onlookers. Macbeth's language, especially in the early part of the scene, is infuriatingly riddled with deictic phrases intelligible only to the off-stage audience, not to the onstage one:

> Which of you have done this?

(3.4.49)

> Thou canst not say I did it—never shake  
> Thy gory locks at me.

(3.4.50-1)

> Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that  
> Which might appal the Devil.

(3.4.58-9)

> Prithee, see there—behold, look, lo

(3.4.69)

> Thou hast no speculation in those eyes

(3.4.96)

> Take any shape but that

(3.4.103)
This', 'it', 'that', 'behold', 'look', 'lo', 'those eyes', and 'any shape but that' can all make sense only in the presence of the referent, but that referent is literally invisible to all others on stage (and it is of course also open to the director similarly to tantalize and titillate the off-stage audience by staging the scene without an actual ghost). Moreover, 'behold', 'look' and 'lo', which Macbeth piles one on top of the other like a demented thesaurus, undo themselves even as they are spoken by their status as near-variants of one another. Their iteration serves only to underline the inadequacy of each on its own: as speech continually glosses itself, with a lack of difference that powerfully reinforces **différance**, we are offered a radical awareness of the slippage between signifier and signified which, even as the deictic is spoken, undermines its ability to show. (Here again, as with the banqueting, we are afforded an ironic prolepsis of the 'show' shortly to be offered by the Weird Sisters).

The whole scene is typical of the experience of Macbeth's subjects: under his rule, they get no visual value for their money. Macbeth himself is a conspicuous example of his regime's radical failure to validate itself through the performance of spectacles of power: even when he becomes aware of his own role-playing, he denigrates acting, characteristically, with his image of the 'poor player' (5.5.24), and when we hear that his title is ill-fitting 'like a giant's role / Upon a dwarfish thief (5.2.21-2) the image may well suggest a simple failure to achieve proper costuming for his part. While the spectacle of Banquo's ghost may be one of horror, it is, surely, more frustrating to be so comprehensively denied not only the experience of seeing it, but of hearing any coherent description of it. Certainly the public, performative nature of state punishment at the time would indicate that such sights would be enjoyed, and it is a pleasure that is definitively envisaged as part of Malcolm's regime:

> Then yield thee, coward,  
> And live to be the show and gaze o'th' time.  
> We'll have thee, as our rarer monsters are,  
> Painted upon a pole, and underwrit  
> 'Here may you see the tyrant'.

(5.7.53-7)

Just as Duncan had made a public show of the execution of Cawdor, with the full Foucauldian apparatus of proper acknowledgement of guilt by the criminal, so the reign of his son will be inaugurated with spectacle: Macbeth's head is publicly produced (5.7.84-5), and the play's last line is an invitation 'to see us crowned at Scone' (5.7.105).

The latter actions of Macbeth's own reign have been in marked contrast to this. As he is seen talking not to his generals or lords, but only to his doctor and his armourer, the paradoxical homeliness of the 'butcher' in him becomes ever more apparent. Dismissing the English as 'epicures' (5.3.8), he notably identifies himself with simpler produce. He rails at the servant 'The Devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon: / Where got'st thou that goose-look?' (5.3.11-12). 'Cream-faced' functions in obvious opposition to 'black', but a simple 'white' would have done so even more strongly; indeed in this sense 'cream', by failing to act as a clear contrast, undoes itself as constituent part of a trope and stakes a claim for a more literal meaning. Particularly in conjunction with 'goose', 'cream' must surely suggest, however momentarily, the simple farmfood from which Macbeth's own actions have so radically alienated him. The images are appropriate, for he is thinking of his 'land' here (5.3.50), and he again sites it in terms of an economy of ingestion when he asks the Doctor 'What rhubarb, senna, or what purgative drug / Would scour these English hence?' (5.3.54-5). It is such images of evacuation and failure to nourish which lead directly to his peculiarly apposite threat to the messenger who informs him that Birnam wood is moving:

> If thou speak'st false,  
> Upon the next tree shall thou hang alive
Till famine cling thee; if thy speech be sooth,
I care not if thou dost for me as much.

(5.5.38-41)

Macbeth counters his enemies' moving wood, with its obvious connotations of renewed fertility and Maying rites, with branches of his own, twice figured as bearing parodic fruit—first the messenger and then himself—which denies life and nourishment rather than celebrating it.

Macbeth's images of a cream-faced, goose-like messenger who hangs like fruit provides the climax to a strain of cannibalistic suggestion throughout the play. Triply interpellating the messenger as foodstuff, he also recapitulates in 'cream' a recurrent play on figures centring on milk and cows. The first example of this comes in Lady Macbeth's invocation, 'Come to my woman's breasts / And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers' (1.5.46-7). This clearly follows from the request to 'unsex me here' (1.5.40), but it may do rather more than simply develop the earlier idea: Janet Adelman suggests that 'perhaps Lady Macbeth is asking the spirits to take her milk as gall, to nurse from her breasts and find in her milk their sustaining poison'. If so, she specifically identifies herself as a food-source, a thing to be eaten. This is soon followed by the most striking and most notorious instance of the image, in Lady Macbeth's infamous lines:

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.

(1.7.54-9)

Clearly this picture of menstrous motherhood encodes a terrifying ferocity, accentuated by the rapidity of the change from the emotional range of 'tender' to that of 'dashed'. Equally, though, the aggression it registers is directed not only against the putative 'babe', but also, masochistically, against Lady Macbeth herself. The action of plucking the nipple from the gum would be (as anyone who has breastfed knows) deeply unpleasant; it is more usual to insert one's little finger to prise the infant's gums apart so that the nipple can be released gently and (relatively) painlessly. Perhaps more suggestive, though, is the tacit auto-interpellation of Lady Macbeth here as a thing milked—in essence, a cow. This not only returns to the earlier motif; it is also closely echoed, as Coppélia Kahn has shown, by Macbeth's lament that 'it hath cowed my better part of man'

(5.7.48). In his final dehumanization, Macbeth is unmanned, feminized, and radically identified with his wife, all in one fell swoop; moreover, all this is achieved, neatly, in another of his monosyllabic, literally household words.

This 'cowing' of both Macbeths works in conjunction with other images of cannibalism in the text. Duncan's horses eat each other (2.4.18); prey and predator change places when a falcon is devoured by a 'mousing owl' (2.4.12-13). Like the Weird Sisters' hideous banquet in which parts of babies are eaten, like Macbeth figuring the messenger and his enemies as cream-faced and goose-like, all of these invert conventional categories of eater and eaten, deconstructing boundaries as crucial to civilization as Lévi-Strauss's raw and cooked. In many of them, the thrust, whether covert or overt, is towards imaging humans themselves as, or in terms of, food, as it is also with the 'chops' of Macdonald and with Banquo's 'marrowless' bones; such an undercurrent may even be discernible in Malcolm's assertion that in comparison with himself, the state will esteem Macbeth as a 'lamb' (4.3.54), and it certainly inheres in Macduff's figuring of Macbeth as a 'hellkite' (4.3.218) and his wife and children as 'chickens and their dam' (4.3.219). All of these offer powerful images of a humanity diminished to either prey or predator, and all of them, again, do so in terms of household words. There is the
lamb which could, in other circumstances, be redolent of the pastoral, the chickens which might, but do not, evoke the farmyard, the mousing owl, the geese and the cream which might also belong there, and the chops and bones which could suggest the kitchen. This is, indeed, a plain diction, but its very plainness is what enables it to strike so directly to the deepest fears, and to allow Macbeth to root horror in the heart and in the home.

What all these instances of plainness do, however, is work to remove the play from the arena of state affairs and situate the concerns of its main characters, at least, insistently within the realm of the domestic. As such, they doubly indicate the reasons for Macbeth's ultimate failure. The expenditure of the use of ceremony in the creation of the royal image, and the seriousness of Macbeth's failure to do so, can perhaps best be appreciated by reinserting the play into the circumstances of its production. Jonathan Goldberg suggests that 'the text of Macbeth that we have derives from a court performance'. He also argues that the dramaturgy of the play is profoundly affected by the traditions of court theatre: 'we can come closer to the source of Macbeth if we look at the Jonsonian masque that stands somewhere behind the masquelike movement that the play ultimately takes' (p. 254). He suggests, as others have done, that the obvious comparator is Jonson's The Masque of Queens, termed by its author 'a spectacle of strangeness', which features an antimasque of twelve witches who boast that they have 'Kill'd an infant, to have his fat' (p. 78). Goldberg terms Jonson's play a 'spectacle of state'; Pye uses the same phrase when he argues that 'Macbeth's "rapture" aligns the play with spectacles of state.' But within Macbeth, it is not only that the Weird Sisters perform a purely private cabaret; there are no spectacles of state at all. Though the play itself may function as one for its offstage audience, the experience of the court to which the play is represented will be radically different from the experience of the court which is represented within it. Goldberg suggests of James and Macbeth that 'one king slides into the other' (p. 251), but however true this may be of the rulers, the very act of staging the play performatively undoes any likeness between the self-presentational strategies of the two regimes.

There may indeed, though, be one pertinent point of similarity between the inhabitants of the stage-play world and those of the court which views it. Though we are carefully reminded that James is descended from Macbeth's enemy, Banquo, and has no blood-link with his tyrannical predecessor, the play may perhaps be seen as encoding subtle comment on James's own attitude towards the use of spectacle. Alan Sinfield notes the particular relevance of touching for the King's Evil to the world of the play: 'James himself knew that this was a superstitious practice, and he refused to undertake it until his advisers persuaded him that it would strengthen his claim to the throne in the public eye.' It might also be worth noting that the title of Jonson's Masque of Queens overtly declares its affiliation with Queen Anne of Denmark—well known for her passion for the theatre—rather than with the King himself. Were James a sufficiently attentive viewer, he might perhaps draw conclusions from Macbeth about the proper use of theatrical display which might lead him to find his own behaviour wanting—except that to do so would probably demand from him a cognitive shift as radical as that which might enable the characters in the play to become aware of their own imbrication in theatricality. If the play can indeed be read as offering such a commentary on the appropriate use of the spectacular, it would then be harking back directly to the didacticism of the morality play, a genre with which the porter scene has already connected it; and in addition to this artistic self-reflexivity, it would also be remarking on the domestic politics of the royal household itself, and pointing up the extent to which, though the language of the home may be plain in diction, it may be complex indeed in terms of resonance and register.

Notes


4 From *The Rambler*, no. 168, 26 October 1751.


9 Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, p. 61.


11 Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 298.


14 This could, I think, be illustrated from many productions, but a recent and striking example was Philip Franks' November, 1994 production at the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield. Lady Macbeth's backless purple dress was so eye-catching that the actress was featured wearing it, in character, in the Sheffield *Star's* 'wardrobe' section (usually including only real people), sharing her 'seduction tips'.


17 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Brooke, I.1.3. All further quotations will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

18 Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 316.


24 *OED* cites the first use of 'chop' as a cut of meat as occurring in 1461, in the Paston Letters.

25 This element would have been even more pronounced when the Cat appeared in the Middleton-authored revisions, which Brooke prints.


31 Suggestively, *Sophonisba*, another play with which *Macbeth* is occasionally compared, also focuses on a queen. (Kenneth Muir comments on the comparison in his introduction to the Arden edition [London, 1951], introduction, p. xxii.)


# Macbeth (Vol. 29): Introduction

**Macbeth**

Recent criticism of *Macbeth* has been preoccupied with the play's presentation of opposing moral values, with the conflicts between natural and supernatural, male and female, and good and evil being the particular focus of critical debate. Thomas McAlindon (1991), for example, has analyzed the title character's entire motivation in terms of metaphysically opposing forces, maintaining that "the meaning of Macbeth's ambition [is] deeply enmeshed in Shakespeare's conception of microcosmic and macrocosmic nature, so that it … dramatises a struggle between the forces of unity and disunity." Other scholars, however, have maintained that such concentration on the drama's oppositional elements simplifies the protagonist's ethical position. Reading the play in the light of performance, R. A. Foakes (1962) stated: "Appearance and reality are no longer separated and set side by side, but are … confused or identified with one another, so that 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' evil and good become hard to distinguish for Macbeth, and he is not only the hero, but the villain of this play as well." Similarly, François Laroque (1989) and Stanley Wells (1994) argue that Shakespeare uses equivocal language in his discussion of the natural and the supernatural, thus denying primacy to either. Other critics, such as Barbara L. Parker (1970) and Huston Diehl (1983), have even contended that the ambiguities in *Macbeth* ultimately suggest a sceptical attitude to the possibility of any reliable human knowledge of the world.

Another primary concern of modern scholars has been the treatment of gender issues. Both Stanley Cavell (1993) and Robert Kimbrough (1983) maintain that Shakespeare blurs traditional gender distinctions in the play. Kimbrough argues that "while Shakespeare in *Macbeth* criticizes the destructive polarity of masculine versus feminine, constantly informing the play is his recognition of a fuller, healthier way of life, his vision of
potential human wholeness, his androgynous vision." By contrast, Carolyn Asp (1981) has focused on the masculine presence in the drama, claiming that Macbeth represents Shakespeare's criticism of an extreme masculine stereotype: "as Macbeth accepts a false masculinity that simultaneously fosters the illusion of his godlike power and diminishes his total human development, he is alienated from the very society that inculcates the stereotype."

The character of Macbeth remains problematic for modern critics. According to J. A. Bryant (1961), Macbeth is a wholly negative character who possesses the capacity for good but chooses to commit evil instead: "Macbeth is certainly diabolical, and he does the Devil's work; but like the Devil he has willed himself into his desperate position, and he is captive of nothing except the Providence he chose to ignore." Other critics, such as Robert B. Heilman (1966), emphasize the ambivalent nature of Macbeth, describing the title character as "the criminal as tragic hero." In examining the play as it appears in performance, Julian Markels (1961) and E. A. J. Honigmann (1976) have maintained that the fundamental ambivalence of the play resides in the response of the audience. They argue that Shakespeare's handling of staging, structure, and symbolism compels the audience both to empathize with Macbeth and to be morally repulsed by him. While some critics, such as Clifford Leech (1967), have claimed that these ambiguities represent Macbeth's leading "a more abundant life through his guilt," T. McAlindon (1973) insists that the ambiguity itself is symptomatic of Macbeth's "breakdown in natural and appropriate relationships, and the semantic disorders and social confusion which are necessarily attendant upon such a breakdown." This response to Macbeth as hero and villain, and Macbeth's apparent insight into his own condition and decline, are for Maynard Mack, Jr. (1973) and Barbara Everett (1989) essential to Shakespeare's creating a truly "tragic" character. As Mack writes in "The Voice in the Sword": "Our Macbeth is a hero as well as villain, and our response to him is multiple … what we have been shown is the destruction of a soul, whose intuitions of a life beyond life are his glory and become his ruin." Thus, for many contemporary critics, the complex relations between the natural and the supernatural, the masculine and the feminine, and good and evil, especially in the character of Macbeth, may not be dichotomies in which Shakespeare depicts clearly dominant elements, but rather ambiguous relationships complicated by Shakespeare for the sake of tragic implication.

Macbeth (Vol. 29): Language And Symbolism

Kenneth Muir (essay date 1966)


[In the following essay, Muir surveys the recurring images and symbols in Macbeth, focusing in particular on images of light and darkness, order and chaos.]
series of interpretations, Miss Spurgeon's concentration on a single iterative image, even though numerically predominant, is apt to be misleading. The total meaning of each play depends on a complex of interwoven patterns and the imagery must be considered in relation to character and structure.

One group of images to which Cleanth Brooks called attention [in The Well Wrought Urn, 1947] was that concerned with babes. It has been suggested … that Shakespeare may have noticed in the general description of the manners of Scotland included in Holinshed's Chronicles that every Scotswoman 'would take intolerable pains to bring up and nourish her own children'; and H. N. Paul pointed out [in The Royal Play of 'Macbeth', 1950] that one of the topics selected for debate before James I, during his visit to Oxford in the summer of 1605, was whether a man's character was influenced by his nurse's milk. Whatever the origin of the images in Macbeth relating to breast-feeding, Shakespeare uses them for a very dramatic purpose. Their first appearance is in Lady Macbeth's invocation of the evil spirits to take possession of her:

Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall,
your murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief.

They next appear in the scene where she incites Macbeth to the murder of Duncan:

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me—
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as
you
Have done to this.

In between these two passages, Macbeth himself, debating whether to do the deed, admits that

Pity, like a naked new-born babe
Striding the blast,

would plead against it; and Lady Macbeth, when she first considers whether she can persuade her husband to kill Duncan, admits that she fears his nature:

It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way.

Later in the play, Malcolm, when he is pretending to be worse even than Macbeth, says that he loves crime:

Nay, had I pow'r, I should
Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell,
Uproar the universal peace, confound
All unity on earth.

In these passages the babe symbolizes pity, and the necessity for pity, and milk symbolizes humanity, tenderness, sympathy, natural human feelings, the sense of kinship, all of which have been outraged by the murderers. Lady Macbeth can nerve herself to the deed only by denying her real nature; and she can overcome Macbeth's scruples only by making him ignore his feelings of human-kindness—his kinship with his
fellow-men.

Cleanth Brooks suggests therefore that it is appropriate that one of the three apparitions should be a bloody child, since Macduff is converted into an avenger by the murder of his wife and babes. On one level, the bloody child stands for Macduff; on another level, it is the naked new-born babe whose pleadings Macbeth has ignored. [In The Business of Criticism, 1959] Helen Gardner took Cleanth Brooks to task for considering these images in relation to one another. She argued that in his comments on 'Pity, like a naked new-born babe' he had sacrificed a Shakespearian depth of human feeling … by attempting to interpret an image by the aid of what associations it happens to arouse in him, and by being more interested in making symbols of babes fit each other than in listening to what Macbeth is saying. Macbeth is a tragedy and not a melodrama or a symbolic drama of retribution. The reappearance of 'the babe symbol' in the apparition scene and in Macduff's revelation of his birth has distracted the critic's attention from what deeply moves the imagination and the conscience in this vision of a whole world weeping at the inhumanity of helplessness betrayed and innocence and beauty destroyed. It is the judgment of the human heart that Macbeth fears here, and the punishment which the speech foreshadows is not that he will be cut down by Macduff, but that having murdered his own humanity he will enter a world of appalling loneliness, of meaningless activity, unloved himself, and unable to love.

Although this is both eloquent and true, it does not quite dispose of Brooks's interpretation of the imagery. Miss Gardner shows that, elsewhere in Shakespeare, 'a cherub is thought of as not only young, beautiful, and innocent, but as associated with the virtue of patience'; and that in the Macbeth passage the helpless babe and the innocent and beautiful cherub 'call out the pity and love by which Macbeth is judged. It is not terror of heaven's vengeance which makes him pause, but the terror of moral isolation. Yet, earlier in the same speech Macbeth expresses fear of retribution in this life—fear that he himself will have to drink the ingredients of his own poisoned chalice—and his comparison of Duncan's virtues to 'angels, trumpet-tongued' implies a fear of judgment in the life to come, notwithstanding his boast that he would 'jump' it. We may assume, perhaps, that the discrepancy between the argument of the speech and the imagery employed is deliberate. On the surface Macbeth appears to be giving merely prudential reasons for not murdering Duncan; but Shakespeare makes him reveal by the imagery he employs that he, or his unconscious mind, is horrified by the thought of the deed to which he is being driven.

Miss Gardner does not refer to the breast-feeding images—even Cleanth Brooks does not mention one of the most significant—yet all these images are impressive in their contexts and, taken together, they coalesce into a symbol of humanity, kinship and tenderness violated by Macbeth's crimes. Miss Gardner is right in demanding that the precise meaning and context of each image should be considered, but wrong, I believe, in refusing to see any significance in the group as a whole. Macbeth, of course, is a tragedy; but I know of no valid definition of tragedy which would prevent the play from being at the same time a symbolic drama of retribution.

Another important group of images is concerned with sickness and medicine, and it is significant that they all appear in the last three acts of the play after Macbeth has ascended the throne; for Scotland is suffering from the disease of tyranny, which can be cured, as fever was thought to be cured, only by bleeding or purgation. The tyrant, indeed, uses sickness imagery of himself. He tells the First Murderer that so long as Banquo is alive he wears his health but sickly; when he hears of Fleance's escape he exclaims 'Then comes my fit again'; and he envies Duncan in the grave, sleeping after life's fitful fever, since life itself is one long illness. In the last act of the play a doctor, called in to diagnose Lady Macbeth's illness, confesses that he cannot...
minister to a mind diseas'd,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart.

Macbeth then professes to believe that what is amiss with Scotland is not his own evil tyranny but the English army of liberation:

What rhubarb, cyme, or what purgative drug
Would scour these English hence?

On the other side, the victims of tyranny look forward to wholesome days when Scotland will be freed. Malcolm says that Macbeth's very name blisters their tongues and he laments that 'each new day a gash' is added to Scotland's wounds. In the last act Caithness refers to Malcolm as 'the medicine of the sickly weal',

And with him pour we in our country's purge
Each drop of us.

Lennox adds:

Or so much as it needs
To dew the sovereign flower and drown the weeds.

Macbeth is the disease from which Scotland is suffering; Malcolm, the rightful king, is the sovereign flower, both royal and curative. Macbeth, it is said,

Cannot buckle his distemper'd cause
Within the belt of rule.

James I, in A Counter-blast to Tobacco, referred to himself as 'the proper Phisician of his Politicke-bodie', whose duty it was 'to purge it of all those diseases, by Medicines meet for the same'. It is possible that Shakespeare had read this pamphlet, although, of course, disease-imagery is to be found in most of the plays written about this time. In Hamlet and Coriolanus it is applied to the body politic, as indeed it was by many writers on political theory. Shakespeare may have introduced the King's Evil as an allusion to James I's reluctant use of his supposed healing powers; but even without this topical reference, the incident provides a contrast to the evil supernatural represented by the Weird Sisters and is therefore dramatically relevant.

The contrast between good and evil is brought out in a variety of ways. There is not merely the contrast between the good and bad kings, which becomes explicit in the scene where Malcolm falsely accuses himself of avarice, lechery, cruelty and all of Macbeth's vices, and disclaims the possession of the king-becoming graces:

Justice, verity, temperance, stableness,
Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,
Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude.

There is also a contrast throughout the play between the powers of light and darkness. It has often been observed that many scenes are set in darkness. Duncan arrives at Inverness as night falls; he is murdered
during the night; Banquo returns from his last ride as night is again falling; Lady Macbeth has light by her continually; and even the daylight scenes during the first part of the play are mostly gloomy in their setting—a blasted heath, wrapped in mist, a dark cavern. The murder of Duncan is followed by darkness at noon—'dark night strangles the travelling lamp'. Before the murder Macbeth prays to the stars to hide their fires and Lady Macbeth invokes the night to conceal their crime:

Come, thick night,
    And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
    That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
    Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
    To cry 'Hold, hold'.

Macbeth, as he goes towards the chamber of the sleeping Duncan, describes how

    o'er the one half-world
    Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
    The curtain'd sleep.

The word 'night' echoes through the first two scenes of the third act; and Macbeth invokes night to conceal the murder of Banquo:

    Come, seeling night,
    Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day …
    Light thickens, and the crow
    Makes wing to th' rooky wood;
    Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
    Whiles night's black agents to their preys do
    rouse.

In the scene in England and in the last act of the play—except for the sleep-walking scene—the darkness is replaced by light.

The symbolism is obvious. In many of these contexts night and darkness are associated with evil, and day and light are linked with good. The 'good things of day' are contrasted with 'night's black agents'; and, in the last act, day stands for the victory of the forces of liberation (v, iv, I; v, vii, 27; v, viii, 37). The 'midnight hags' are 'the instruments of darkness'; and some editors believe that when Malcolm (at the end of Act IV) says that 'The Powers above / Put on their instruments' he is referring to their human instruments—Malcolm, Macduff and their soldiers.

The opposition between the good and evil supernatural is paralleled by similar contrasts between angel and devil, heaven and hell, truth and falsehood—and the opposites are frequently juxtaposed:

This supernatural soliciting
    Cannot be ill; cannot be good.
    Merciful powers
    Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature
    Gives way to in repose!
    It is a knell
    That summons thee to heaven or to hell.
Several critics have pointed out the opposition in the play between night and day, life and death, grace and evil, a contrast which is reiterated more than four hundred times.

The evidence for this has gone beyond imagery proper and most modern imagistic critics have extended their field to cover not merely metaphor and simile, but the visual symbols implied by the dialogue, which would be visible in performance, and even the iteration of key words. The Poet Laureate once remarked that Macbeth is about blood; and from the appearance of the bloody sergeant in the second scene of the play to the last scene of all, we have a continual vision of blood. Macbeth's sword in the battle 'smok'd with bloody execution' he and Banquo seemed to 'bathe in reeking wounds'; the Sergeant's 'gashes cry for help'. The Second Witch comes from the bloody task of killing swine. The visionary dagger is stained with 'gouts of blood'. Macbeth, after the murder, declares that not all great Neptune's ocean will cleanse his hands:

this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.

Duncan is spoken of as the fountain of his sons' blood; his wounds

look'd like a breach in nature
For ruin's wasteful entrance.

The world had become a 'bloody stage'. Macbeth, before the murder of Banquo, invokes the 'bloody and invisible hand' of night. We are told of the twenty trenched gashes on Banquo's body and his ghost shakes his 'gory locks' at Macbeth, who is convinced that 'blood will have blood'. At the end of the banquet scene, he confesses wearily that he is 'stepp'd so far' in blood, that

should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

The Second Apparition, a bloody child, advises Macbeth to be 'bloody, bold, and resolute'. Malcolm declares that Scotland bleeds,

and each new day a gash
Is added to her wounds.

Lady Macbeth, sleep-walking, tries in vain to remove the 'damned spot' from her hands:

Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.

In the final scene, Macbeth's severed head is displayed on a pole.... The subject of the play is murder, and the prevalence of blood ensures that we shall never forget the physical realities in metaphysical overtones.

Equally important is the iteration of sleep. The first statement of the theme is when the First Witch curses the Master of the Tiger:

Sleep shall neither night nor day
Hang upon his penthouse lid.

After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth and his wife
In the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly;
while Duncan, 'after life's fitful fever ... sleeps well'. An anonymous lord looks forward to the overthrow of the tyrant, when they will be able to sleep in peace. Because of 'a great perturbation in nature', Lady Macbeth is troubled with thick coming fancies
That keep her from her rest.

The key passage in the theme of sleeplessness, derived apparently from Holinshed and Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, occurs just after the murder of Duncan, when Macbeth hears a voice which cries 'Sleep no more!' It is really the echo of his own conscience.... As Murry puts it [in *Shakespeare*, 1935]:

He has murdered Sleep, that is 'the death of each day's life'—that daily death of Time which makes Time human.

The murder of a sleeping guest, the murder of a sleeping king, the murder of a saintly old man, the murder, as it were, of sleep itself, carries with it the appropriate retribution of insomnia.

As Murry's comment suggests, the theme of sleep is linked with that of time. Macbeth is promised by the Weird Sisters that he will be king 'hereafter' and Banquo wonders if they 'can look into the seeds of time'. Macbeth, tempted by the thought of murder, declares that 'Present fears / Are less than horrible imaginings' and decides that 'Time and the hour runs through the roughest day'. Lady Macbeth says she feels 'The future in the instant'. In his soliloquy in the last scene of Act I, Macbeth speaks of himself as 'here upon this bank and shoal of time', time being contrasted with the sea of eternity. He pretends that he would not worry about the future, or about the life to come, if he could be sure of success in the present; and his wife implies that the conjunction of time and place for the murder will never recur. Just before the murder, Macbeth reminds himself of the exact time and place, so that he can relegate ... 'the moment to the past from which it will never escape into the future'. Macbeth is troubled by his inability to say amen, because he dimly realizes he has forfeited the possibility of blessing and because he knows that he has become 'the deed's creature'. The nightmares of the guilty pair and the return of Banquo from the grave symbolize the haunting of the present by the past. When Macbeth is informed of his wife's death, he describes how life has become for him a succession of meaningless days, the futility he has brought upon himself by his crimes:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time,  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death.

At the very end of the play, Macduff announces that with the death of the tyrant 'The time is free' and Malcolm promises, without 'a large expense of time' to do what is necessary ('which would be planted newly with the time') and to bring back order from chaos 'in measure, time, and place'.

From one point of view *Macbeth* can be regarded as a play about the disruption of order through evil, and its final restoration. The play begins with what the witches call a hurly-burly and ends with the restoration of order by Malcolm. Order is represented throughout by the bonds of loyalty; and chaos is represented by the powers of darkness with their upsetting of moral values ('Fair is foul and foul is fair'). The witches can raise winds to fight against the churches, to sink ships and destroy buildings: they are the enemies both of religion and of civilization. Lady Macbeth invokes the evil spirits to take possession of her; and, after the murder of
Duncan, Macbeth's mind begins to dwell on universal destruction. He is willing to 'let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer' merely to be freed from his nightmares. Again, in his conjuration of the witches in the cauldron scene, he is prepared to risk absolute chaos, 'even till destruction sicken' through surfeit, rather than not obtain an answer. In his last days, Macbeth is 'aweary of the sun' and he wishes 'the estate of the world' were undone. Order in Scotland, even the moral order in the universe, can be restored only by his death. [In Dramatic Providence in Macbeth, 1958] G. R. Elliott contrasts the threefold hail with which Malcolm is greeted at the end of the play with the threefold hail of the witches on the blasted heath: they mark the destruction of order and its restoration.

All through the play ideas of order and chaos are juxtaposed. When Macbeth is first visited by temptation his 'single state of man' is shaken and 'nothing is but what is not'. In the next scene (I, iv) Shakespeare presents ideas of loyalty, duty, and the reward of faithful service, in contrast both to the treachery of the dead Thane of Cawdor and to the treacherous thoughts of the new thane. Lady Macbeth prays to be spared 'compunctious visitings of nature' and in the next scene, after the description of the 'pleasant seat' of the castle with its images of natural beauty, she expresses her gratitude and loyalty to the king. Before the murder, Macbeth reminds himself of the threefold tie of loyalty which binds him to Duncan, as kinsman, subject and host. He is afraid that the very stones will cry out against the unnaturalness of the murder, which is, in fact, accompanied by strange portents:

Lamentings heard i' th' air, strange screams of death,
And prophesying, with accents terrible,
Of dire combustion and confus'd events
New hatch'd to th' woeful time.

The frequent iteration of the word 'strange' is one of the ways by which Shakespeare underlines the disruption of the natural order.

Passages which older critics deplored, and which even H. N. Paul regarded as flattery of King James, may be seen as part of the theme we have been discussing. Macbeth's curious discourse on dogs is one of these passages. It was inserted not mainly because of James's proclamation on the subject, but to stress the order of nature—*naturae benignitas*—'the diverse functions and variety within a single species testifying to an overruling harmony and design' and it is used to persuade his tools to murder Banquo. In the scene in England, Malcolm's self-accusations—in particular his confession of wishing to uproar the universal peace and confound all unity on earth—are disorders contrasted with the virtues he pretends not to have and with the miraculous powers of the pious Edward.

Reference must be made to two other groups of images, which I have discussed elsewhere in some detail—those relating to equivocation and those which are concerned with the contrast between what the Porter calls desire and performance. The theme of equivocation runs all through the play. It was suggested, no doubt, by the topicality of the subject at Father Garnet's trial, but this links up with 'the equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth', the juggling fiends 'That keep the word of promise to our ear / And break it to our hope', and Macbeth's own equivocation after the murder of Duncan:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had liv'd a blessed time; for, from this instant,
There's nothing serious in mortality—
All is but toys; renown and grace is dead;
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of.
Macbeth's intention is to avert suspicion from himself by following his wife's advice to make their 'grievances and clamour' roar upon Duncan's death. But, as he speaks the words, the audience knows that he has unwittingly spoken the truth. Instead of lying like truth, he has told the truth while intending to deceive. As he expresses it later, when full realization has come to him, life has become meaningless, a succession of empty tomorrows, 'a tale told by an idiot'.

The gap between desire and performance, enunciated by the Porter, is expressed over and over again by Macbeth and his wife. It takes the form, most strikingly, in the numerous passages contrasting eye and hand, culminating in Macbeth's cry—

What hands are here? Ha! They pluck out mine eyes—

and in the scene before the murder of Banquo when the bloodstained is no longer Macbeth's, but Night's:

Come, seeling night,
Scarfe up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale.

In the sleep-walking scene, Lady Macbeth's unavailing efforts to wash the smell of the blood from her hand symbolize the indelibility of guilt; and Angus in the next scene declares that Macbeth feels

His secret murders sticking on his hands.

The soul is damned for the deeds committed by the hand.

It has recently been argued that the opposition between the hand and eye provides the clearest explanation of that division in Macbeth between his clear 'perception of evil and his rapt drift into evil'. Lawrence W. Hyman suggests [in Tennessee Studies (1960)] that Macbeth is able to do the murder only because of the deep division between his head and his hand. The

almost autonomous action of Macbeth's dagger, as if it had no connection with a human brain or a human heart, explains the peculiar mood that pervades the murder scene … As soon as he lays down the dagger, however, his 'eye' cannot help but see what the hand has done.

A study of the imagery and symbolism in Macbeth does not radically alter one's interpretation of the play. It would, indeed, be suspect if it did. In reading some modern criticisms of Shakespeare one has the feeling that the critic is reading between the lines and creating from the interstices a play rather different from the one which Shakespeare wrote and similar to a play the critic himself might have written. Such interpretations lead us away from Shakespeare; they drop a veil between us and the plays; and they substitute a formula for the living reality, a philosophy or a theology instead of a dramatic presentation of life. I have not attempted to reshape Macbeth to a particular ideological image, nor selected parts of the play to prove a thesis. Some selection had to be made for reasons of space, but I have tried to make the selection representative of the whole.

We must not imagine, of course, that Macbeth is merely an elaborate pattern of imagery. It is a play; and in the theatre we ought to recover, as best we may, a state of critical innocence. We should certainly not attempt to notice the images of clothing or breast-feeding or count the allusions to blood or sleep. But, just as Shakespeare conveys to us the unconscious minds of the characters by means of the imagery, so, in watching
the play, we may be totally unconscious of the patterns of imagery and yet absorb them unconsciously by means of our imaginative response to the poetry. In this way they will be subsumed under the total experience of the play.

And what of the producer? It would be quite fatal for him to get his actors to underline the key images—to make them, as it were, italicize them with a knowing wink at the professors in the stalls or the students in the gallery. All we should ask of the producer in this matter is that he should give us what Shakespeare wrote, and all that Shakespeare wrote, and that he should not try to improve on the script provided by the dramatist.

T. McAlindon (essay date 1991)


[In the following essay, McAlindon discusses the numerical symbolism that reinforces Macbeth as a "tragedy of ambition."]

Even though the text overtly invites us to do so, nothing might seem more reductive than to consider Macbeth as a tragedy of ambition. The meaning of Macbeth's ambition, however, is complex, being deeply enmeshed in Shakespeare's conception of microcosmic and macrocosmic nature, so that it reaches out to engage in a significant relationship with everything else in the play. In this respect Shakespeare is developing a conception of ambition which was systematically and explicitly articulated in Marlowe's Tamburlaine the Great, where the hero, a 'fiery thirster after sovereignty' (Part I, II.vi.31), justifies his ambition and its attendant violence by an appeal to the dynamics of Nature:

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Nature, that fram'd us of four elements,
Warring within our breasts for regiment
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds.
(Part I,II.vii. 18-20)
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Thus 'martial' Tamburlaine is identified throughout with the element of fire, at once the 'noblest' and most 'aspiring' as well as the most destructive of the elements. Zenocrate is the Venus whose tears moderate his violence, his marriage to her being analogous to the concordant discord of Nature herself. Her death unleashes all the destructiveness in his nature, so that he ends his career with the burning of Babylon and dies as the victim of a fiery fever.

The character of Macbeth and the whole atmosphere in which he moves set Shakespeare's tragedy at a vast remove from Marlowe's. But in addition to the common subject of an ambitious usurper, and the shared Renaissance sense that ambition can be a noble virtue or a deadly vice, the two plays have an underlying philosophical affinity that must have been readily perceptible to Renaissance audiences. Macbeth's ambition is a desire not so much for power and wealth as for 'greatness'. It proceeds from a restless striving which he himself scarcely understands and which compels him to 'o'erleap' all obstacles of person, time, and place so as to win, as tokens of his transcendent worth, golden opinions and the golden round. It is a form of desire made manifest not only in martial valour but also in a powerful imagination which obliterates the achievements and satisfactions of the present with its bewitching delineations of future deeds. It makes him yearn always for 'more' (I.iii.70), drives him to 'do and ... do and ... do' (line 10), makes him vault beyond great and greater to 'the greatest' (line 117). But counter-balancing this compulsion towards striving and strife is Macbeth's 'milk of human kindness' (I.v.14), signifying the impulse which binds him to others in affectionate partnership; thus before his tragic transformation he is a man loved (I.vi.29; IV.iii.13) as well as admired by all. Emblematised as he stands shoulder to shoulder with Banquo in defence of a just social order, this union of contrary impulses is already on the point of collapse at the beginning of the play; and its collapse is Macbeth's and his country's tragedy. Critics have rightly pointed out that although Macbeth is the shortest of Shakespeare's
tragedies, it has some claim to being 'the most complex and subtle in its statement.' Many, too, have pointed out the characterisation of its criminal hero has a strange ambivalence which is reflected in a ubiquitous sense of doubleness. That the play's subtle complexities are generated by its dualistic outlook is generally acknowledged; what remains to be emphasised is that its dualistic character emanates from a particular construction of reality which Shakespeare absorbed from his own culture.

Perhaps more than any of the other tragedies, Macbeth dramatises a struggle between the forces of unity and disunity. Without opening up the debated question as to what extent it is a tragedy tailored to please King James, one can reasonably detect in this emphasis a discreet nod in the direction of James's title—in which he himself took pride—as the prince of peace and union. The emphasis can be seen in the characterisation of Duncan as a conscientious ruler who leaves fighting to those of his nobility who relish it, rewards them generously for their endeavours, and seeks to bind them all to him and to each other in a gracious and fruitful mutuality. Although the order which Duncan represents is a feudal order, Shakespeare naturalises, validates, and interprets it not by the discourse of hierarchy but by that of contrarious unity. Some three years before Macbeth, Middleton and Dekker celebrated James's coronation and progress through the city of London with an 'entertainment' which actually personifies the Four Elements and shows them joining hands in a renunciation of their 'natural desire / To combat each with other'—symbolising an end to the dissensions which afflicted English society at the close of Elizabeth's reign. So too Shakespeare delineates the essential significance of Duncan's character in the superb passage where he and Banquo evoke an image of nature's opposites, both elemental and sexual, joyfully united in a procreant harmony (I.vi.1-10). To argue that Macbeth deploys the 'naive', 'geriatric', unequivocal discourse of a metaphysically sanctioned absolutism, and that this hierarchical discourse is mischievously negated at every point by a double-vision discourse that reflects the deconstructive energies and indeterminacies of language (a subversive process which Shakespeare himself was by implication unaware of) is entirely unacceptable. As even this purportedly 'naive' and 'geriatric' passage suggests, the double vision of the play is manifestly the product of its controlling discourse: the harmonious order jointly imagined by Duncan and Banquo accommodates hierarchy, but it is essentially a loving partnership of nature's opposites; and the poetry no less than the dramatic context makes clear that this contrarious, 'pendent' order is as fragile and vulnerable as it is fruitful.

Evil is regularly referred to in the most orthodox manner in Macbeth as unnatural, on the assumption that whatsoever is natural is good. But this simple conception of nature is assimilated to a more comprehensive view which acknowledges 'nature's mischief (I.v.50) no less than its bounty (III.i.97), compunction (I.v.4), and love. The fate of Macduff's nest and its abandoned 'birds', pitilessly destroyed 'At one fell swoop' by Macbeth's 'Hell-kite' (IV.iii.216-19), stands in diptychal relation to the Duncan-Banquo passage on the temple-haunting martlet and correlates with numerous imagistic echoes of nature's dark ferocity. This natural ferocity is intimately associated with demonic evil and with the attempt of the fallen angels (IV.iii.22) to undo the work of the Creator; many in Shakespeare's audience would no doubt have recalled standard Christian doctrine to the effect that the strife of the elements in the world and in humankind was a consequence of the Adamic fall. But the demonic supernaturalism of the play functions more as intensification than as explanation: it adds horror, mystery, and awe to the extraordinary spectacle of cruel violence erupting in the 'gentle weal' and its most 'worthy gentleman'. The most important insight furnished by the play is that the equivocating witches and the malignant spirits that tend on mortal thoughts are potent precisely because they are in tune with the bewildering doubleness of the natural order.

One of the most remarkable features of this tragedy is the way in which number symbolism co-operates with nature symbolism in the process of signalling key ideas relating to the tragic theme of disunity and chaos. This may be largely due to the fact that here, as in Julius Caesar, Shakespeare the tragedian shows a more than usual interest in time, the movement of the heavenly bodies, and history. The tradition of numerical symbolism and the temporal sensibility were closely related in literature since there was a natural connection between the time sense, astronomy, and the art of exact measurement according to number.
It has long been recognised that *Macbeth* abounds in trinities and that this accords with the traditional association of the number three with the rituals of witchcraft. But threes and twos, trebling and doubling, are closely linked throughout the play; and this relationship, I would add, is extended to include the idea of endless multiplication—‘terrible numbers’, ‘multitudinous seas’, 'the multiplying villainies of nature', 'confineless harms'. What this pattern does—or would have done for a Renaissance audience attuned to cosmological discourse—is to evoke in large the Pythagorean concept of cosmos as limit and measure and of chaos as the unlimited, the innumerable. In its totality, therefore, the number pattern corresponds with Macbeth's grim calls for the frame of things to disjoint (I.II.16) and the united elements to 'Confound and swallow ... up' all natural and human order (IV.I.52-60) if his desires are not fulfilled. More particularly, this symbolic pattern focuses sharply on the idea that 'doubleness' is the root cause of tragic change and confusion, so that the witches' refrain, 'Double, double, toil and trouble; / Fire burn, and cauldron bubble' (IV.I.10-11, 19-20, 35-6) might be taken as the play's epigraph.

… [In] *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and (less obviously) *Othello* Shakespeare exploited the traditional association of 'the indefinite binarie' with the undoing of unity and limit, and with error, rebellion, duplicity, confusion, darkness, and devilry. More obviously relevant to the concerns of *Macbeth*, this symbol is thoroughly integrated to the tragedy and semantically modified to support its special pattern of meaning. On the one hand, the symbol signifies excess, transgression of limit, the beginning of multiplication (doubling). It relates thus to Macbeth's fondness for the word 'more' ('Tell me more!') and his contempt for 'enough' ('And damn'd be him that first cries, "Hold, enough!"'). It relates also to Banquo's prayer for restraint (II.I.8), to his warning that unlawful augmentation may mean loss (lines 26-7), and his perception that Duncan, who retires to bed 'shut up / In measureless content' (lines 16-17), has discovered the great paradox that self-fulfillment entails self-containment. But doubleness also signifies duality-without-unity, contradiction, duplicity, and so, too, confusion and doubt (there is covert play throughout on the aural link between 'double' and 'doubt': 'I ... begin / To doubt th'equivocation of the fiend etc.). The most frequent manifestations of doubleness are specifically stylistic and are to be found in the extensive use of antithesis, paradox, oxymoron, pun, equivocation, and dramatic irony (a form of continuous and unintentional pun or equivocation.) But doubleness as a numerical phenomenon is heavily stressed throughout, and at the start it is projected in such a way as to illuminate the whole nature of the impending tragedy. In scene ii (after the three witches have chanted their confusingly dualistic sing-song—'the battle's lost and won', 'Fair is foul and foul is fair'), the Captain reports on the progress of the battle against the rebels, and in doing so depicts a fierce struggle between two almost undistinguishable opponents (in this context even the names of the two men add to the sense of near-identical opposites). The battle, reports the Captain, stood 'doubtful', like 'two spent swimmers that do cling together / An d choke their art (I.ii.7-10). Then 'brave Macbeth' 'carv'd out' a passage through the rebels until he confronted 'the merciless Macdonwald' (on whom 'the multiplying villainies of nature / Do swarm') and quickly sliced him in two, having first 'unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops' (lines 7-23). The next part of the Captain's report focuses on the heroic partnership of Macbeth and Banquo, and here the emphasis is on the way uncurbed valour might prove self-destructive: undo the unity of the self, make the hero his own enemy. The two men were 'As cannons overcharg'd with double cracks' (where 'crack' signifies both 'split' and 'explosion'). Undaunted by the increased numbers on the opposite side, they 'Doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe' and seemed as if they would 'memorise another Golgotha' (lines 37-41). The impression of doubleness, doubt, and confusion which emanates from these two passages—Duncan's 'worthy gentleman' is also a 'butcher' (v.vii.69) in the making; the two honourable captains threaten to emulate the soldiers who crucified Christ—is reinforced in Rosse's account of the battle and causally associated once more with the idea of excess: Macbeth stood firm against Norway's 'terrible numbers' and confronted the rebellious Thane of Cawdor 'with self-comparisons, / Point against point, rebellious arm 'gainst arm, / Curbing his lavish spirit' (lines 53-8). The hint of contrarious transformation arising from the syntactic displacement of the word 'rebellious', which should qualify the second 'arm', is resoundingly accented at the end of this scene by the King's declaration that Macbeth is to be rewarded with Cawdor's title.
In the third scene Macbeth meets the witches for the first time, and their equivocal prophecies begin the process of Assuring his unstable identity. Because they tell him 'Two truths' (that he is both Glamis and Cawdor), and also revive old thoughts about murdering Duncan (as is usually inferred from his guilty 'start' at line 51), Macbeth judges that their 'soliciting / Cannot be ill; cannot be good'. Banquo resolves this paradox by recourse to standard Christian doctrine, remarking that the instruments of darkness tell us trifling truths 'to betray's / In deepest consequence'. But Macbeth seems not to hear his 'partner', for he drifts off immediately into the 'Two truths' soliloquy and reveals that his 'single state of man' is so shaken that nothing is but what is not: in imagination, he is already murdering the King whom he serves so valiantly (I.iii.122-44).

Initially, Lady Macbeth's influence is more important than that of the witches in undoing Macbeth's single state. She is fully conscious of how doubtful he stands ('Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it … wouldst not play false, / And yet wouldst wrongly win' (I.v. 16-19). She is also possessed of an instinct for doubling, and a contempt for unity, singleness, and limit, that will overwhelm him. In her hypocritical welcoming of Duncan, she protests that all her service, 'In every point twice done, and then done double, / Were poor and single service' when matched against his generosity (I.vi.14-18). This prepares for her assault on Macbeth. His 'better part of man' claims that to do more than becomes a man is to be none; but she retorts with consuming conviction that on the contrary he would be 'so much more the man' if he were to murder Duncan (I.vii.46-51). And before this vision of being 'so much more' the man he is—with his courage 'screw'd to the sticking place'—Macbeth collapses in awe: 'Bring forth men children only!'

One of Shakespeare's favourite symbols for the binary nature of human beings, the hand (our two-handedness), is incorporated in the pattern of symbolic doubleness and developed into one of the most imaginatively potent verbal and visual motifs in the play. In Romeo and Juliet and Julius Caesar, there was the hand of love and the hand of hate, the hand that unites and the hand that violently divides. Here that symbolic dichotomy remains, but the eye joins the gentle hand in opposition to its violent counterpart. This complication of the manual symbol allows it to mesh with the light-darkness dualism and at the same time to serve as an index of the psychophysical disorder which Macbeth and his wife bring upon themselves—and ultimately on the whole of Scotland—when they commit themselves to the path of murder. In I.v and I.v., each of them independently identifies the hand with action that is not only violent but also wilfully blind: carried out so swiftly as to escape the restraining censorship of the eye, symbolising (as the most sensitive of the bodily organs) that side of human nature which recoils in pain from the perception of physical cruelty. Macbeth's,

*Stars, hide your fires!*
Let not light see my dark and deep desires!
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.
(I.v.50-3)

is echoed in his wife's

*Come, thick night,*
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
To cry, 'Hold, hold!' (I.v.47-51).

That the eye has largely displaced the gentle hand as the violent hand's opposite (moving the emphasis away from simple contrast to the idea of an intense and traumatic revulsion) is most clearly shown when Macbeth steels himself for the killing of Banquo:
Come, seeling
night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale. Light thickens …
(III.ii.46-50)

The most memorable uses of the hand—eye opposition are both visual and verbal. The dagger which marshals
Macbeth towards Duncan's chamber is a false creation of the heat-oppressed brain which makes fools of his
eyes as it moves invitingly before hi, 'the handle toward my hand' (H.i.33-44). The play on 'hand' and 'handle'
simultaneously identifies the hand with the dagger and hints at its alienation from the body. This hint is
confirmed after the murder with Macbeth's horrified cry: 'What hands are here? Ha! they pluck out mine eyes'
(line 59). Lady Macbeth's remark that a little water will clear the blood from his hands is, of course, echoed by
her obsessive hand-washing in the final act. But what I wish to stress about that delirium is the way in which
it restores the original symbolic antithesis. For she is now in imagination the sympathetic and loving wife
whose hand is tenderly extended to comfort her distraught husband: 'Come, come, come, come, give me your
hand. What's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed' (V.i.48-63). This image of what might have been
is undercut in the last scene with Malcolm's news that Macbeth's fiend-like queen took off her life 'by self and
violent hands' (V.ix.36-7). The double-hand symbol occurs also in the contrasting allusions to the 'hand
accurs'd' (III.vi.49) which rules Scotland and that of the gracious king whose 'touch' cures those afflicted with
ulcerous diseases 'pitiful to the eye'—'such sanctity hath / Heaven given his hand' (IV.iii.144-52). This is
clearly the antithesis which encloses the hand—eye opposition, since gracious Edward's hand is visually
paralleled in the first half of the play by that of gracious Duncan: 'Give me your hand. Conduct me to mine
host: we love him highly' (I.vi.28-30).

The equivocating, duplicitous witches are initially instrumental in destroying Macbeth's single state of man by
playing on his twofold nature, ensnaring him in doubleness, and projecting him unrestrained into a realm of
multiplying villainy. Their identification with threeness, however, is no less emphatic than that with
doubleness; it functions as a continuous reminder that Macbeth is undone by his desire for more, his belief
that the titles of Glamis and Cawdor are not enough.

Why the number three should be associated with witchcraft in Christian tradition might seem puzzling. The
Christian deity after all is a Holy Trinity; indeed in many cultures, three is a symbol of fullness, power, and
divinity. The explanation, of course, lies in the fact that witchcraft, like devilry, is a rival system which
parodies what is seeks to overthrow.

The witches' threeness, like their doubleness, is encoded in the play at every level of expression. The
resources of language (as well as the structure of the human body) are such that it was much easier for
Shakespeare to give continuous and unobtrusive expression to the idea of an ensnaring duality; and he had
already had abundant practice in doing so. But he addressed the problem of encoding threeness in an
astonishingly thorough and inventive manner. Character grouping at a secondary level, and also emblematic
imagery, provide periodic echoes of Act I's opening emphasis on 'we three'. The Porter admits three imaginary
sinners into Hell, the first an equivocator (II.iii.4- 17). Macbeth hires three murderers to kill Banquo and
Fleance, the third apparently an afterthought to 'make assurance double sure' (IV.i.83). And in Macbeth's final
meeting with the witches, his demand for 'more' (line 103) of their 'more … than mortal knowledge' (I.v.2)
is answered by three equivocal apparitions and then by 'a show of eight kings … Banquo following’—a group of
nine, the witches' favourite multiple of three. This procession reflects the ironic process of retributive reaction
against Macbeth's lust for more that is now well under way in the tragedy. Thus it seems to him as if the line
of kings descending from Banquo 'will … stretch out to th' crack of doom' and he cries in rage, 'I'll see no
more' (IV.i.117-18). The 'twofold balls and treble sceptres' (line 121) carried by some of the kings bring
together the two fatal numbers in a manner which connects contemporary history (in the person of King James, supposed descendant of Banquo) with the retributive process. The twofold balls are usually taken to refer to the double coronation of James at Scone and Westminster; the treble sceptres were the two used for investment in the English coronation, and the one used in the Scottish coronation. This two—three emblem would seem to signify both unified duality and authentic fullness or supremacy (i.e. divinely sanctioned kingship).

Threeness is mirrored also in action and time. The witches make three appearances in all (if we follow the general view that III.V. is not Shakespearian). Duncan, it would seem, is murdered at 3 a.m., and the Porter and his friends carouse until the same hour. Macbeth commits three major crimes: the murders of Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff's family; and one of the most striking—and generally unnoticed—facts about the first crime is that it involves two additional and entirely unplanned murders: little did Lady Macbeth think when she sent the terrified Macbeth back with the daggers that he would spontaneously kill the two grooms. The Macbeths appear as king and queen for the first time at the beginning of the third act ('Thou hast it now, King, Cawdor, Glamis, all', line I); and Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking is seen by the Doctor only on the third night (V.i.I).

It is language itself, however, that the number three most conspicuously informs; and this is always effected in such a way as to accent the motifs of doubleness and excess. The chant which opens the play begins with a couplet followed by a triplet: five lines in which the witches proclaim their threeness and at the same time identify themselves with confounding opposites and storm-chaos:

1. Witch. When shall we three meet again?  
   In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
2. Witch. When the hurly-burly's done,  
   When the battle's lost and won.
3. Witch. That shall be ere set of sun.

Each of them departs at the behest of a familiar, two of which are named. The name of the Third Witch's familiar is withheld; it will be added on the third appearance of the witches—in the third line of the scene (IV.i.3). In fact the addition of a tantalising third is the principle which structures the witches' greeting—a kind of mock investiture (I.iii.48-50) in which each line is itself a structure of three threes:

1. Witch. All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane  
   of Glamis!
2. Witch. All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane  
   of Cawdor!
3. Witch. All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King  
   hereafter!

Banquo picks up this triple pattern in his interrogation of the witches: 'My noble partner / You greet with present grace, and great prediction / Of noble having and of royal hope' (lines 54-6). Anticipating the royal entry of Act III, scene i, Macbeth translates the triple promise into a royal drama which will reach its desired climax after the second act: 'Two truths are told, / As happy prologues to the swelling act / Of the imperial theme' (lines 127-9; cf. lines 116-17). Two scenes later Lady Macbeth appropriates the triple greeting and grimly determines that its third component will materialise: 'Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be / What thou art promis'd' (I.V.13-14).

Other manifestations of the witches' addiction to the number three occur in I.iii just before Macbeth's arrival, and are notable for the exactness with which they are enwoven in the play's unfolding pattern of meaning. Macbeth's entry is immediately preceded by the following chant, which the witches recite in unison:
The Weird Sisters hand in hand,
Posters of the sea and land,
Thus do go about, about;
Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
And thrice again to make up nine.
Peace! The charm's wound up. (lines 32-7)

In the first lines here we have doubleness, adroitly linked in the third line to the idea of ambition by means of an etymological pun: the Latin *ambire* means 'to go about', and *ambitio* means 'going about in order to win popularity and power'. More important, however, ambitious doubleness leads to threeness and thence to multiplication.

The First Witch's promise of vindictive action against the captain of the *Tiger* isolates the play's key word, 'do / deed', and anticipates, and numerically emphasises, the tragic pattern whereby Macbeth's 'horrid deed' traps him in a hell of torturing, sterile, restless, and endless activity:

I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do

I'll drain him dry as hay:
Sleep shall neither night nor day
Hang upon his penthouse lid;
He shall live a man forbid.
Weary sev'n-nights nine times nine,
Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine …
(lines 10, 18-23)

The word 'do' or 'deed' echoes insistently throughout the play, but on several occasions, beginning with Macbeth's, 'If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly' (I.vii.1-2), it repeats the First Witch's triple iteration (cf. lines 46-8; III.ii.43-4).

Before the final appearance of the witches, verbal threeness is heard in the ghostly voice which tells Macbeth that he will sleep 'no more' (II.ii.41-3), in the outcry after Duncan's body is discovered ('0 horror! horror! horror!', II.iii.62), and in the Porter scene. The Porter, however, delights in conjoining threes and twos. He mimics the knocking on the door with a 'Knock, knock, knock', followed shortly by 'Knock, knock', a pattern which he repeats a few sentences later. He tells the two men who enter that he was 'carousing till the second cock' (i.e. 3a.m.), and that drink 'is a great provoker of three things'. Its provocations, he explains, are equivocal and duplicitous (II.iii.1-37).

The triadic principle affects language most conspicuously in the third and last appearance of the witches. And here too its partnership with both doubleness and limitlessness is strongly emphasised. A double 'Thrice' opens the scene (IV.i.1-2) and the couplet refrain, 'Double, double, toil and trouble; / Fire burn and cauldron bubble' is chanted three times (lines 10-11, 20-1, 35-6). The 'secret, black, and midnight hags' (line 47) pour into their cauldron the blood of a sow that has eaten her nine farrow (line 65).

Both the first and second apparitions address Macbeth as 'Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth!' (lines 71, 77), and he answers, 'Had I three ears, I’d hear thee' (line 78). Al though they warn him to beware Macduff, they tell him equivocally to

Be bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn
The power of man … (lines 79-80)
Be lion-mettled, proud, and take no care
Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are.
(lines 90-1)

In accordance with this fierce insistence on diabolical threeness, the scene ends with Macbeth's terrible determination that from now on he will set no limits—either of number ('all unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line') or time ('be it thought and done')—to his killing.

The last expressions of threeness are given to the two Macbeths, and they function clearly as elements in the pattern of condign punishment which characterises the latter part of the play. Lady Macbeth's final words are, 'To bed, to bed, to bed' (V.i.64); and her sleepless husband sees himself condemned to a near-interminable succession of days and nights: 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow …'

It will be apparent, I hope, that the number symbolism which I have outlined above simply could not be a critical invention. Conventional canons of taste might wish to exclude consideration of such material from any account of Macbeth as a major Shakespearian tragedy, and relegate it instead to the pages of some learned, minor journal for the benefit of those who take pleasure in such arcane matters. To ignore it, however, would be to disregard something which clearly meant a great deal to Shakespeare; which makes Macbeth (like Julius Caesar) a far more intricate and artful play than has customarily been thought; and which provides us moreover with firm clues as to its meanings. Its special relevance in this context lies, of course, in the fact that number symbolism is part of the language of cosmology; its presence helps to support my general approach to the tragedy.

At the heart of the play lies the great cosmological theme of love and strife, articulated in Macbeth's (no longer valid) description of himself as a man with 'a heart to love, and in that heart / Courage, to make's love known' (II.iii.116-17). His tragedy is that of a valiant soldier whose courage overspills into a violent cruelty, and whose capacity for love and pity gives way to a destructive hatred that finally embraces life itself. The union of woman and man (and especially martial man) being symbolic of the union of opposites in all nature, Macbeth's marriage, like Othello's, is crucial to an understanding of his character and destiny. Lady Macbeth may be totally unlike Desdemona, but this play too should be read as the tragedy of a marriage as well as of a great man. Macbeth and his wife had, it would seem, a true bond. His deep love for her is economically but firmly indicated. We infer it from the way he writes instantly to share his success with her; from the terms of endearment which spring easily to his lips; from his admiration for her powerful will and his need for her respect; and from his desire to protect her from the knowledge of Banquo's impending murder. Given the vicious role she has to play, her love for her partner, and her affectionate disposition, are much less apparent than his, especially at the beginning. But they are real nonetheless. It is true that she scorns 'the milk of human kindness' and renounces her woman's milk for gall, but it is also true that she admits to having tenderly loved the babe that milked her (I.V.17; I.vii.54-5). Her tenderness manifests itself after Duncan's murder when her own misery responds to Macbeth's and she seeks to comfort him with gentle words. In her, 'Gentle my lord, sleek o'er your rugged looks … ' (III.ii.28), the emotional rather than the social sense of the word 'gentle' is primary, and it has reference to both wife and husband: at once kindly and fierce. Her tenderness shows yet again after the departure of the guests on the night of Banquo's murder ('You lack the season of all natures, sleep', II.i.141); and, of course, in the sleep-walking scene. The tender love-and-pity shown in these glimpses of her womanly nature is what should have predominated in her relationship with Macbeth. According to the chivalric model, and the mythic one which underpins it, her gentleness should have moderated his martial fire and in so doing have helped him to achieve and maintain heroic integrity. What happens instead is that Lady Macbeth, in her desire to help her husband realise his ambition, effects a willed but temporary suppression of her 'feminine' qualities, allows the 'masculine' element in her nature to predominate, and at the same time brings about a complete suppression of those 'feminine' elements in her husband's nature which are essential to full humanity.
In *King Lear* we saw that 'to be tender-minded' and 'pregnant to good pity' does indeed 'become a sword'. Here, however, the element of humane feeling which keeps a brave defender of 'the gentle weal' (III.iv.76) from becoming a merciless rebel is expanded to include fear as well as love-and-pity (a complication anticipated in *Hamlet*). Macbeth has a capacity for fear which is wholly at variance with an accepted notion of manliness. But the accepted notion, which Lady Macbeth uses as a scornful whip to drive him to murder, is largely invalidated here. Initially, Macbeth's fear and compassion are almost synonymous. The mere thought of murdering Duncan becomes for him a horrid image that unfixes his hair and makes his heart knock at his ribs; it also overwhelms him with the image of Pity as a naked newborn babe exposed to the elements, its plight assaulting every eye and drowning the wind with tears (I.iii.135-8; I.vii.19-25). And there is pity as well as fear (the eye's pity) in his refusal to return to the scene of his crime: 'Look on't again I dare not' (II.ii.50-1).

The rest of Macbeth's career becomes a continual and never fully successful attempt to overcome fear (the fear now of guilt and insecurity) by means of reckless violence. In this development, the decision to kill Banquo is finely significant. When he calls upon Night's bloody and invisible hand to tear to pieces the great bond that keeps him pale, the word 'pale' signifies not only fear but also a defensive limit: it is the palisade which protects the gentle weal from wolf, bear, and shag-eared villain. In rejecting the moral instinct of fear ('honest [i.e. honourable] fear' it is called in *The Rape of Lucrece*, line 173), Macbeth goes beyond the pale of humanity to become a figure of terror, obsessively fighting 'pale-hearted fear' (IV.i.85) in himself and his reluctant followers: 'Hang those that talk of fear' (V.iii.36; cf. lines 10-17). In the last act, he himself records, and then manifests with haunting eloquence, the results of his war on fear. Hearing the cry of women, he asks flatly, 'What is that noise?', and recalls that his senses would once have cooled to hear a night-shriek: direness, familiar to his slaughterous thoughts, cannot once start him (V.v.7-14). The situation pointedly echoes the night when he 'heard a voice cry, "Macbeth doth murder Sleep,—the innocent Sleep"', and asked his wife in terror, 'Didst thou not hear a noise?' (II.ii.14 , 35; cf. line 58). What Macbeth has succeeded in destroying is the fear that is entwined with his feeling for others, the fear of the tender eye. The implications of that success are disclosed when the cause of the women's fearful cry is announced. His response to the news of his wife's death is one of total insentience: he has no time to mourn for her now, and even if he had, there would be no point: life is meaningless, and so is death (lines 17-28). This from a man once full of the milk of human-kindness, who dearly loved the woman who has died: a wife last, mad, tender words were, 'To bed, to bed'. Shakespeare's sense of tragic change and loss is nowhere more acute than here.

Macbeth's response to his wife's death, as has often been noted, is significantly contrasted with Macduff's reaction to the news that his family has been slaughtered. Macduff stands in paralysed silence for a while, and when urged to convert his grief to rage and 'dispute it like a man', he replies:

> I shall do so;  
> But I must also feel it as a man.  
> I cannot but remember such things were,  
> That were most precious to me. (IV.iii.220-3)

Macduff has been accused by his wife of being deficient in both love and courage. But these terse, expressive lines show him to be the complete man, and provide a final comment on the ideal of manliness as heartless daring presented by Lady Macbeth and internalised by her husband. Critical comments on this final contrast, however, tend to imply that Macduff is the full man Macbeth never managed to become, the model which discloses his intrinsic insufficiency. This, I believe, is a serious misreading of the text, and one which weakens its tragic impact. Macduff is merely a diminished version of what Macbeth once was. Indeed one of the most remarkable features of Macbeth's disintegration is that he remains in some sense a man of humane feeling even when his sensibility is in ruins. The ever increasing coarseness and brutality which he exhibits in his address to others is counterpointed by sudden soliloquising or quasi-soliloquising revelations of a self that hates what it has become. After his furious berating of the hapless Seyton, comes:
I have liv'd long enough. My way of life
Is fall'n in the sere, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare
not.

(V.iii.22-8)

After the order to 'Hang those that talk of fear', comes: 'Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased ... Cleanse
the stuff d bosom of that perilous stuff / Which weighs upon the heart?' (lines 40, 44-5). And after the
contemptuous killing of Young Siward comes the wholly unexpected confession to Macduff: 'my soul is too
much charg'd / With blood of thine already' (V.viii.5-6).

Whether the image of the nobly courageous soldier is restored in Macbeth's final 'bear-like' (V.vii.2)
stand—whether the first Cawdor's epitaph, 'Nothing in his life / Became him like the leaving it' (Liv.7-8), and
Young Siward's, 'like a man he died' (V.viii.43), function as analogy or contrast—is a question which has
generated much disagreement. Having already considered the matter elsewhere, I shall merely draw attention
to something which seems never to be remarked on, and which has special relevance in the context of this
interpretation. Macbeth's last words are: 'And damn'd be him that first cries, "Hold, enough!"' (V.viii.34).
These words are the epitaph Macbeth gives himself, and with an economy that is characteristic of
Shakespeare's most mature art, each of them reaches deep into the imaginative roots of the play. In the
doctrine of contraries, as we have seen, the idea of limit is crucial. The bond which unites opposites is also a
bound or boundary which separates and distinguishes them; things decline to their confounding contraries
when the limit is transgressed. The great man stretches himself to the utmost point of endeavour; beyond it he
becomes his own opposite, ceases to be. Once the brightest of angels (IV.iii.22) and loved by all, Macbeth in
the end is hated as the blackest of devils (lines 52-6), his soul given over to 'the common enemy of man'
(III.i.68). In fact Macbeth, the great defender, has become the common enemy.

The idea of limit is implicit in that of the deed, one of the most complex and significant image-concepts in the
play. The term incorporates a pun which was not peculiar to Shakespeare but can be found as early as the
fifteenth-century morality play, Everyman: it is implied there that every deed or action is a deed in two senses
of the word: it is a bond with inescapable, binding consequences and can never be relegated to the past as a
thing over-and-done-with. Marlowe tied the pun to the myth of the devil compact in Doctor Faustus, setting
up an ironic relationship between the deed or 'deed of gift' which Faustus makes with Lucifer and his
convenant with God, represented by Jerome's Bible—the Old and New Testament or Covenant. The essence
of Faustus' tragedy is that in seeking by his convenant with Lucifer to escape from the limitations imposed
upon him by the divine convenant he sacrifices a condition of limited freedom ('the freedom of the sons of
God') for what turns out to be a state of degrading servitude; the deed of gift, and every one of his 'proud
audacious deeds', make him the terrified and obedient servant of 'proud Lucifer'.

In Macbeth, the broken convenant is constituted primarily of the 'strong knots' (IV.iii.27) by which human
beings seek to 'bind' (Liv.43) themselves to one another in love, kindness, and gratitude: the knots which
Macbeth acknowledges to be 'strong ... against the deed' (I.vii.14). The archetype of this kind of bond is not
the soul's convenant with God but the bond which reconciles and joins the warring opposites in nature. The
divine bond is secondary; it is suggested by the grace of 'gracious Duncan' and 'holy Edward', generous- and
gentle-handed men who personify the qualities which unite whole communities as well as individuals. The
divine bond's opposite is the 'bond of fate' (IV.i.83) into which the Macbeths enter when, in pursuit of more
and more, and in their willingness to cancel and tear to pieces every bond that keeps them pale, they call for
aid upon Night, the spirits, and the witches.
The whole tragedy might be read as an exploration of the 'deed' pun. Once Macbeth has done 'the horrid deed', he is committed by the logic of consequences to more and more of the same, so that his guilt becomes inescapably obvious and resistance to him inevitable. Instead of being strong as the rock and free as the air, he finds himself 'cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears' (III.iv.20-4). Lady Macbeth's assurance that 'A little water clears us of this deed' and its 'filthy witness' (II.ii.66, 46) is answered in the sleep-walking scene by her discovery that the bloody deed is indelible, a past act that is eternally present: 'What's done cannot be undone' (V.ii.65). But the terrible folly of her assumption is underscored throughout by continual play on 'do-deed-done-undone', by the whole design of the play, with its emphasis on ironic reversal and condign punishment, and above all by the delineation of Macbeth's tortured psychological state. The bloody deed ruptures his inner being ('To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself (II.ii.72)), isolates him entirely from his kind (even from his 'dearest partner of greatness') and prompts him in the end to wish that 'th' estate o' th' world were now undone' (V.v.50). Macbeth knows he has surrendered his soul to the devil, but whereas Faustus is tortured by the thought of an eternity in Hell, Macbeth never once reflects on the pains of the afterlife. In effect, damnation is just a metaphor for the suffering he has brought upon himself in this world by sinning against kindness and humankind.

The theme of the deed in turn is incorporate in that of time. The connection can be inferred from the use of legal terminology which identifies the allotted span of life as a lease (IV.i.99), copyhold (III.ii.38), or bond (line 49) granted to the individual by Nature as Time. The connection is disclosed in dramatic form through Macbeth's initial realisation that if the deed is to be done then it must be 'done quickly', and by his subsequent commitment to violent, unreflecting action: 'This deed I'll do before the purpose cool' (IV.ii.154). Furthermore, the meaning of the deed is that time is an organic unity or natural order in which the relationship between past, present, and future cannot be served. In Doctor Faustus, the clock whose chimes mark the end of the hero's rebellion and the beginning of retribution suggests that time is an arm of divine justice. In Macbeth, time itself is the ultimate arbiter of justice, and comprehends in itself all the binding laws against which the hero rebels.

In no other tragedy of Shakespeare is time so comprehensive in its significance or so continuously implicated in what is said and done. The term itself spreads out in every direction so that it signifies all humans and the world in general ('To beguile the time, / Look like the time'), history ('the volume of … time', 'recorded time'), and a natural order which is also a corrective order: 'Time thou anticipat'st my dread exploits' (IV.i.144). Perhaps what most distinguishes the treatment of time here is the insistent emphasis on its function as part of a spatio-temporal order, an order of time-and-place. This idea is foregrounded at the outset in the witches' questions (summarising the whole purpose of their first dialogue): 'When shall we three meet again?' 'Where the place?' The same idea is localised in the conception of Macbeth's usurpation as 'Th' untimely emptying of the happy throne' (IV.iii.68), and its untimely occupation. Such indeed is the emphasis on the necessary relationship between time and place that all references to time alone effectively signify the entire 'frame of things' (III.ii.16).

The importance of time in this tragedy seems to arise naturally out of Shakespeare's exploration of the psychology of ambition, especially as it manifests itself in Macbeth's singular temperament. Ambition is a perpetual dream of the future; and in a highly imaginative man like Macbeth it is an obsession with what might be so intense that it makes what is almost unreal, and certainly worthless, by comparison. For such a man, prophecy is fatally attractive; it plays on his habitual tendency to become 'rapt'—spiritually transported to other times and places. So Macbeth's destiny is fully disclosed in the third scene when the witches encapsulate his whole life—past, present, and future—in three titles. Wishing desperately that they had told him 'more', Macbeth breaks away from the quartet of friendship which he has formed with Banquo, Rosse, and Angus, and drifts into the 'Two truths' soliloquy where he sees the image of himself as Duncan's murderer and finds that nothing is but what is not. Banquo's remark, 'Look how our partner's rapt' (I.iii.143) anticipates the tragedy of isolation and disintegration which is to follow. This little emblematic drama repeats itself when Macbeth leaves the chamber where Duncan is being entertained to soliloquise about if and when it were done;
and yet again when he leaves the table to talk to the murderer of Banquo, his chief guest—after which he is 'rapt' as never before.

If the witches are fatally in harmony with Macbeth's obsession with the future, so too is his wife. His letters about 'the coming on of time', she tells him, have 'transported me beyond / This ignorant present, and I feel now / The future in the instant' (I.v.56-8). In getting Macbeth to actualise the future which seems so immediate to her, she echoes the witches' opening dialogue by constructing an argument in which she perverts the notion not only of what becomes a man but also of what befits time and place. What better than to kill the king when he comes 'here to-night' to shower more honours on us? Never did 'time, nor place … adhere' as they do now (I.v.28, vii.51-2; cf.II.i.59-60). This claim heralds a state of chaos in which nothing ever seems to fit time or place, so that Duncan's murder is very aptly termed 'Confusion[s] … masterpiece' (II.iii.67). The first sign of such 'disjointing' in the frame of things is very pertinent to Lady Macbeth's own tragedy. While Macbeth trumpets his false grief, Malcolm and Donalbain perceive that this is neither the time nor the place to grieve for their father:

What should be spoken
Here, where our fate, hid in an augur hole,
May rush, and seize us? Let's away.
Our tears are not yet brewed. (lines 119-22).

Just so, Lady Macbeth's death is announced to her husband in a besieged castle when the tenderness she scorned has been drained out of him: 'She should have died hereafter …'

More noticeable, however, is the way in which the Macbeths set themselves up as masters of time and place. The midnight bell is delayed until three o'clock so that it becomes a signal for murder rather than 'good repose' (H.i.29). The frantic scene in which the news of Duncan's death is announced ends with Macbeth's authoritative words, 'Let's briefly put on manly readiness, / And meet in the hall together' (II.iv.132-3). In the next scene we hear that 'he is already … gone to Scone / To be invested' (II.iv.31-3), Duncan's body having been placed in the storehouse of his predecessors; and in the two scenes following—the appropriately hectic tempo of the play is now established—he is sitting on Duncan's throne, appointing times and places for his subjects. Banquo is to ride swiftly on his business so as to appear tonight as chief guest at the banquet (III.i.15, 37). Banquo thinks he is 'master of his time' (line 40), but Macbeth is preparing to 'take tomorrow' (and tomorrow and tomorrow) from him (line 22) by means of a plan which is most exact in its ordering of time and place:

Within this hour, at most,
I will advise you where to plant yourselves,
Acquaint you with the perfect spy o' th' time,
The moment on't; for't must be done to-night,
And something from the palace. (lines 127-31)

The feast itself begins as an elaborate parody of fitness in time and place (III.iv.1-6). This serves only to emphasise the violent exclusion of the chief guest, and the abrupt manner in which the other guests are 'displac'd' (line 108) and dismissed ('go at once', line 117). More generally, it emphasises the feast's function as a symbol of the confusion which characterises Scotland in the new regime.

A striking peculiarity of the play is the emphatic manner in which Macbeth's appropriation of time and place is reflected in nature at large and represented as a violation of Nature's organic unity and creative cycle. When Duncan is murdered the darkness and tempest associated initially with the witches take control of all nature, so that the perception of chaos is intense. Most notably, the moon and stars are invisible during the night (an answer to the Macbeths' demonic prayers), and the sun fails to rise when 'by th' clock 'tis day' (II.i.115;
II.iv.6). As a creature of the night who uses the midnight bell to signal violence rather than 'good repose', Macbeth attacks sleep, which is 'the season of all natures': not just a restful division between one day and the next, but a form of re-creation in the diurnal cycle. Macbeth also seeks to destroy 'the seeds of time' (I.iii.58) in the reproductive cycle, attempting to ensure that Banquo's 'seed' (III.i.69) will not produce its line of kings, and successfully obliterating Macduff's procreant nest.

Nature reacts by paying Macbeth in kind. He eats his meals in fear and sleeps no more. The rebellious dead rise from their graves to haunt his waking dreams and take from him 'the place reserv'd' (III.iv.45) at the feast of life. The 'earth-bound root' of Birnam wood unfixes itself and moves to Dunsinane (IV.i.92-5). And there a man untimely ripped from his mother's womb completes the process of even-handed justice, making a mockery of the assurance that 'our high-plac'd Macbeth / Shall live the lease of Nature, pay his breath / To time and mortal custom' (lines 98-100). But even before he dies Macbeth is already a withered tree (V.iii.23), condemned in his own mind to live in a chaos of time where life is a featureless succession of undistinguishable nights and days: process without pattern, motion without rest: 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow … '

Others there are in Macbeth's Scotland whose commitment to the bonds of nature is disclosed in a respect for time or time-and-place; their attitudes and actions serve to define Macbeth by contrast and in the end to facilitate the restoration of nature's creative harmony. Duncan is responsive to the 'pleasant seat' and healthy ambience of Macbeth's castle, and Banquo knows that when summer comes the martlet loves to build his procreant cradle in such places. Gracious and unhurried though his manner is, Duncan has decided to stay only one night at the castle and has ordered Macduff 'to call him timely' for his part, Macduff is agitated because he has 'almost slipp'd the hour'—the vigorous knocking on the door which grates on the Porter's hangover is evidence of Macduff's determination to act 'timely' (H.iii.44-5; emphasis added). Malcolm's delaying of grief, and his instant flight from Scotland, are indications of a vigilant, foreseeing wisdom which later saves him from rushing with 'overcredulous haste' into the many traps set by Macbeth to 'win' him 'into his power' (IV.i.117-20) (an obvious contrast to Macbeth's reaction to the witches' assurances). Macduff's refusal to grant credence until after the battle has been fought to rumours that Macbeth's followers are deserting (V.iv.14-16) reflects the same attitude; it is helpfully glossed by his partner-in-arms, Siward, in a manner which comments clearly on Macbeth's credulous impetuosity:

> The time approaches
> That will with due decision make us know
> What we shall say we have, and what we owe.
> Thoughts speculative their unsure hopes relate,
> But certain issue strokes must arbitrate;
> Toward which advance the war. (lines 16-21)

Malcolm's 'royalty of nature' is fully demonstrated in the play's concluding speech. Like Duncan, he bestows honours on the deserving in token of love and gratitude (V.ix.26, 40), and wastes no time in doing so (line 26). Whatever else is to be 'newly planted with the time', he promises to perform 'in measure, time, and place' (where measure denotes both number and limit). And his final emphasis is on the unity of all in Scotland's place of kings: 'So thanks to all at once, and to each one, / Whom we invite to see us crown'd at Scone.'

Those of us who have never lived under the heel of a brutal tyrant are apt to react strongly to Malcolm's reference in this speech to the dead butcher and his fiendlike queen. Malcolm, however, is speaking truthfully about one half of the story (when 'o'er the one half-world / Nature seems dead'), and the only half which matters in the end to those who survive the terror. Neither that remark, nor the undoubted slackening of tension when he is present, should blind us to the importance of what Malcolm says in Acts IV and V. Much of it constitutes Shakespeare's considered epilogue to the swelling act of Macbeth's imperial theme. It is perfectly true, however (and herein lies much of the greatness of the tragedy), that Malcolm's concentration on
the image of the butcher who would 'confound / All unity on earth' (IV.iii.99-100) in no way obliterates—in fact intensifies—our poignant awareness of the valiant partner, gentle husband, and sensitive man the protagonist once was. The perception voiced in the epilogue to *Doctor Faustus* is implicitly, and far more powerfully, embodied here: 'Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight.'

Stanley Cavell (essay date 1992-93)


[Cavell is an American critic and philosopher whose books include The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy (1979). In the following essay, which originally appeared in two parts, Cavell explores the "silences" in Macbeth and their effect on the perception of the masculine/feminine dichotomy, Macbeth's possible child, and the witches.]

When a given text is claimed to work in the light, or in the shadow, of another—taking obvious extremes, as one of a given work's sources or as one of its commentaries—a measure of the responsibility of such a linking is the degree to which each is found responsive to the other, to tap the other, as for its closer attention. *Macbeth* is a likely work to turn to in these terms on a number of counts. Being Shakespearean melodrama, it takes up the question of responsiveness, the question, we might say, of the truth of response, of whether an action or reaction is—or can be—sensually or emotionally adequate to its cause, neither withholding nor excessive (Macbeth's to news of his wife's death, or Macduff's to his wife's and his children's, or Macbeth's to Banquo's reappearance, or Lady Macbeth's to Macbeth's return from the wars). More than any other Shakespearean tragedy, *Macbeth* thematically shows melodramatic responsiveness as a contest over interpretations, hence over whether an understanding is—or can be—intellectually adequate to its question, neither denying what is there, nor affirming what is not there (a deed, a dagger). As if what is at stake is the intelligibility of the human to itself.

The question of human intelligibility takes the form, in what I want to begin to work through in *Macbeth*, of a question of the intelligibility of human history, a question whether we can see what we make happen and tell its difference from what happens to us, as in the difference between human action and human suffering. I conceive of *Macbeth* as belonging as much with Shakespearean histories as with the tragedies, but not as a history that takes for granted the importance of the political and of what constitutes a pertinent representation of its present condition. It raises, rather, the question of what history is a history of, hence the question of how its present is to be thought of. This continues the direction I was taking the last time I was caught up in a text of Shakespeare's, in thinking about *Antony and Cleopatra*. There, accepting as uncontroversial the ideas that a Shakespeare history play forms some precedent or parable for its own political present, and that the playing of Antony and Cleopatra and their company is a setting for world catastrophe, I proposed thinking through the play as a representation of the catastrophe of the modern advent of skepticism (hence also of the advent of the new science, a new form of knowing), taken as an individual and a historical process. (This is recorded in the introduction to my *Disowning Knowledge*.) But while certain contemporary historical events are accepted as sources for *Macbeth*—accounts of the Gowrie Conspiracy and of the Gunpowder Plot—there is not, to my knowledge, an uncontroversial sense of the play as unfolding, in its claustrophobic setting, its own sense of its present politics and of human history. On the reading of the play proposed here this lack of clarity itself becomes a certain confirmation of the play's invocation of its sense of its own matrix, specifically a sense of the political as itself changing, as itself a scene of obscurity, even, one might say, of the occult.

I might describe the drift of this reading as following out my sense that the texts of *Macbeth* and of *Antony and Cleopatra*—I am glad to accept them as dating within a year or so of one another—are opposite faces of a study of the interpenetration of the erotic and the political. Here is a way I described the changeover of worlds envisioned in *Antony and Cleopatra*: "Hegel says that with the birth of Christianity a new subjectivity enters
the world. I want to say that with the birth of skepticism, hence of modern philosophy, a new intimacy, or wish for it, enters the world; call it privacy shared (not shared with the public, but from it).” *Macbeth,* I conjecture, secretes its own environment of a new intimacy, of privacy shared, a setting not exactly of world catastrophe but of a catastrophe of privacy, hence of a certain politics. This privacy is expressed in philosophy as a catastrophe of knowledge. It may be thought of as the skeptical isolation of the mind from the body, simultaneously a sense that everything is closed to, occluded in, human knowledge (in philosophy?) and at the same time that everything is open to human knowledge (in science? in magic?). The aspiration and eroticization of the new science invoked at the opening of *Antony and Cleopatra* (“Then must you needs find out new heaven, new earth”) marks its relation to and distance from the closing of the world of *Macbeth* within magic, science's origin and shadow.

It matters to me, in ways some of which will become explicit, to mention in passing another sort of unfinished or continuing business of mine determining my interest in history in *Macbeth*—my attention in recent years to the work of Emerson, in which narrative history, let us say, is under incessant attack. It is clear enough that Emerson's mission as a writer of the philosophical constitution of a new nation is in part to free its potential members from an enslaving worship of the past and its institutions, in religion, in politics, in literature, in philosophy. But the anticipation is quite uncanny, in his "History," the first essay of his First Series of Essays, of the spirit of the Annales historians' disdain for great events, their pursuit of the uneventful, a pursuit requiring an altered sense of time and of change, an interpretation of what I call the ordinary or the everyday. I had thought that Emerson's formulations concerning history would play a more extensive role in this text—or in some unwritten one of which the present text is perhaps a fragment—than has so far proven the case. At present I will be content with four citations from "History":

> I have no expectation that any man will read history aright, who thinks that what was done in a remote age, by men whose names have resounded far, has any deeper sense than what he is doing to-day.

> But along with the civil and metaphysical history of man, another history goes daily forward—that of the external world,—in which he is not less strictly implicated.

> I am ashamed to see what a shallow village tale our so-called History is…. What does Rome know of rat and lizard? What are Olympiads and Consulates to these neighboring systems of being? Nay, what food or experience or succor have they for the Esquimaux seal-hunter, for the Kanaka in his canoe, for the fisherman, the stevedore, the porter?

> When a thought of Plato becomes a thought to me,—when a truth that fired the soul of Pindar fires mine, time is no more.

The immediate background for what follows formed itself in an unpredicted interaction of two seminars I was teaching two springs ago. The more elaborate of these was a large seminar on recent trends in Shakespearean criticism that my colleague Marjorie Garber and I were offering on an experimental basis to a group of students divided between the study of literature and of philosophy. The division itself is one that various trends in contemporary literary theory have promised to move beyond, but which, in my part of the academic forest, is kept in place by all but immovable institutional forces. The division itself is one that various trends in contemporary literary theory have promised to move beyond, but which, in my part of the academic forest, is kept in place by all but immovable institutional forces. The trends in criticism we proposed to consider fell, not surprisingly, into the more or less recognizable categories of feminist, psychoanalytic, and new historicist work; but while as an outsider to the institutions of Shakespeare study I was happy for the instruction in recontextualizing this material, and while the feminist and the psychoanalytic continued to seem to me about what I expected criticism to be, the new historicist, for all its evident attractions, kept presenting itself to me as combating something that I kept failing to grasp steadily or clearly. Put otherwise, in reading the feminist and/or the psychoanalytic critics I did not feel that I had in advance to answer the questions, What does Shakespeare think women are, or think psychology is?, but that I could read these pieces as part of
thinking about these questions; whereas I found myself, in reading the new historicist critics, somehow required to have an independent answer to the question, What does Shakespeare think history is?

The form the question took for me more particularly was, How does Shakespeare think things happen?—is it in the way science thinks, in the way magic thinks, or religion, or politics, or perhaps in the way works of art, for example, works of poetic drama think? It is not clear that these questions make good sense. You may even feel in them a certain unstable frame of mind, as if there is already palpable in them a response to Macbeth.

This form of the question of history was shaped for me by the other seminar I was offering that spring, on Romanticism and skepticism, in which the romantic fantasy of a union between philosophy and poetry was a recurrent topic, particularized in the question to what extent Emerson is to be thought of as a philosopher and the question of the extent to which, or sense in which, Wittgenstein's thinking is a function of his writing. An important theoretical statement of the questions of philosophy and writing for the seminar was Heidegger's "On the Origin of the Work of Art," taking up its formulation according to which the work of the work of art is that of letting truth happen; and taking up Heidegger's relating, as the German does, of the idea of happening to the idea of history; so that the implied notion is that truth becomes historical in art. This can be seen as a contesting of Hegel's finding that the belief in art as the highest expression of truth is a thing of the past. Behind both Heidegger and Emerson we read Friedrich Schlegel, the great translator and follower of Shakespeare, who had called for the union of philosophy and poetry, who had said that what happens in poetry happens in a given work always or never, whose concept of poesis, or poetic making or work, evidently inspires Heidegger's idea of the particular, irreplaceable work art does, and who in his extraordinary essay "On Incomprehensibility" cites Shakespeare's "infinitely many depths, subterfuges, and intentions" as an example of the conscious artist enabled to carry on "ironically, hundreds of years after their deaths, with their most faithful followers and admirers," and who also in that essay on incomprehensibility had said, "I absolutely detest incomprehension, not only the incomprehension of the uncomprehending but even more the incomprehension of the comprehending"—the moral of which I take to concern the present human intellectual task as one of undoing our present understanding of understanding, a task I find continued with startling faithfulness to Schlegel's terms in Emerson's "Self-Reliance," understanding this essay to be, as it quite explicitly declares itself to be, an essay on human understanding.

In the reading we assigned ourselves for our Shakespeare seminar, I found Macbeth to be the text of Shakespeare's about which the most interesting concentration of current critical intelligence had been brought to bear. Both Marjorie Garber and Janet Adelman have recently published major discussions of the play, as has Steven Mullaney, whose work cites its affiliation with, and is cited in the work of, Stephen Greenblatt. While Macbeth is not given special attention in Greenblatt's Shakespearean Negotiations, certain sentences from that book's introduction—entitled "The Circulation of Social Energy"—rather haunt the preoccupations that will guide my remarks here. Greenblatt's introduction concludes with the sentence, "The speech of the dead, like my own speech, is not private property," about which I feel both that I agree with the intuition or impulse being expressed, and at the same time, that this expression invites me to deny something—something about the privacy of language—that I have never affirmed, that no one can simply have affirmed. I must try, even briefly, to articulate this double feeling.

I am not alone in finding the most significant work of this century on the idea of the privacy of language to be Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations. Wittgenstein rather cultivates the impression—which the prevailing view of him takes as his thesis—that he denies language is private; whereas his teaching is that the assertion or the denial either of the publicness or of the privateness of my language is empty. Philosophers, typically modern philosophers, do chronically seem to be denying something, typically that we can know there is a world and others and we in it, and then denying that they are denying it. Wittgenstein is distinguished by asking (as it were nonrhetorically), "What gives the impression that I want to deny anything?" His answer has to do with his efforts to destroy philosophical illusions (ones he takes apparently as endemic in Western philosophical thought): denial is in the effect of a presiding, locked philosophical struggle.
between, let us say, skepticism and metaphysics. To understand this effect or impression is part of Wittgenstein's philosophical mission. For him simply to deny that he is denying privacy, say by asserting publicness, would accordingly amount to no intellectual advance. It would merely constitute a private assertion of publicness, as though publicness itself had become private property. Something of the sort is a way of putting my intuition of what Macbeth is about; one might call it the privatization of politics or think of it as a discovery of the state of nature.

Because at the moment I see my contribution to the study of Macbeth to lie perhaps in addressing certain features of its language that I find peculiar to it, I shall mostly forgo discussion of recent important work, and its conflicts, on the question of gender in Macbeth, as for instance Janet Adelman's proposal (in "Born of Woman") that the play embodies at once fantasies of absolute maternal domination and of absolute escape from that domination (a discussion, besides, whose generosity in the notation of the critical literature goes beyond my scholarship); and as Marjorie Garber's rather conflicting proposal (in "Macbeth: The Male Medusa") that the play studies gender indeterminacy. I mark this elision here and at the same time give a little warm-up, out-of-context exercise in the way I read Shakespeare's lines, by taking a certain exception to Garber's interpretation in that piece of a familiar exchange in Macbeth, one that can be taken as involving a discourse of gender.

When Macbeth says, "I dare do all that may become a man. / Who dares do more is none," Lady Macbeth replies, "What beast was't then / That made you break this enterprise to me? / When you durst do it, then you were a man" (I, vii, 46-49). Garber reads this as an all-too-familiar sexual taunt, a questioning of her partner's masculinity. Without denying the taunt in Lady Macbeth's question, I find myself struck by her taunting interpretation of Macbeth's idea of excessive daring as meaning that to strike beyond certain human limits is to be a beast. If we take it—something that will come back—that Lady Macbeth shares with Macbeth, as they share every other idea, something like the idea of men as beasts, then this tells another way to hear her puzzling continuation: "To be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man" (I, vii, 50-51). That is: To be more beast is to be more man. On this way of thinking, her sexual taunt is something more than, or is prejudicially confined in being called, an "attack upon his masculinity, his male identity." It is as much an attack on human sexuality as such, as it has revealed itself; surely including an attack on its presence in her.

My fastening on to the species reading of the sexual taunt—its expression of an anxiety about human identity—has been prepared by the way I have over the years addressed the issue of philosophical skepticism as an expression of the human wish to escape the bounds or bonds of the human, if not from above then from below. I call it the human craving for, and horror of, the inhuman, of limitlessness, of monstrousness. (Besides being a beast, another specieslike contrast with being human is being a monster. It may be that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have reason to suppress this possibility while they can, to cover it with a somewhat different horror.) There is in me, accordingly, a standing possibility that I use the more general, or less historical (is it? and is it more metaphysical?) species anxiety to cover a wish to avoid thinking through the anxiety of gender. If there is a good reason to run this risk it is that the reverse covering is also a risk, since knowing what is to be thought about the human is part of knowing what is to be thought about gender.

The risks of confining interpretation—to move now further into the play—are exemplified in the much-considered announcement of Macduff's that he was untimely ripped from the womb. Macbeth's response is to denounce, or pray for, or command disbelief in, the "fiends / That palter with us in a double sense; / That keep the word of promise to our ear, / And break it to our hope" (III, viii, 19-22). The picture here is that to wish to rule out equivocation, the work of witches, is the prayer of tyranny. The picture is itself equivocal, however, since it must be asked why Macbeth believes Macduff. That means both: Why does he believe this man? and Why does he believe what this man says? Here I can merely assert something. In turning against Macduff (to "try the last against him"), Macbeth is contesting not simply a man (whatever that is) but an interpretation; or really a double interpretation. The first interpretation, I believe uncontested, is that
being of no woman born just means being untimely ripped from the womb. Some critics have expressed puzzlement and dissatisfaction over this interpretation, feeling that a fateful moment is made to depend on a quibble, as if Shakespeare is being superficial or sloppy; yet they feel forced to accept it, presumably because Macbeth accepts it. But I do not know that any have expressed a sense that Macbeth may himself (though he has suggested other possibilities—that Macduff derives from a girl, or from witches) have felt forced.

This is the burden of what I suggest as the second interpretation Macbeth contests in his fatal encounter with Macduff, one that associates with the name of Caesar the procedure of delivering a child by an incision through the abdominal wall and uterus. Macbeth had identified Banquo as the one "under [whom] / My genius is rebuk'd; as, it is said, / Mark Antony's was by Caesar" (III, i, 53-55). It is congenial to my sense of things that this fact of Caesar's rebuke cited by Macbeth about Mark Antony is notable in Antony and Cleopatra; beyond this, my suggestion that Macbeth silently associates Macduff's origin as partaking of Caesar's and so transfers to the antagonist before him the power to rebuke or subdue his spirit (for example the power to force his acceptance of that other's interpretation of what is between them), is a reading which reveals Macbeth to be afraid of domination by a masculine as much as by a feminine figure. I say he is contesting an interpretation (or fantasy), and it is one to which, this being tragedy, he succumbs, having (always) already accepted an interpretation (that of witchery)—as if the other face of tyranny (or a redescriptions of its fear of equivocation) is fixation, say superstition. (Of course my second interpretation depends on granting that Shakespeare knew the surgical procedure in question under the Caesarean interpretation.)

Since (what proves to be) the equivocation of "no woman born" is a construction of the witches, and since fixing its meaning as being ripped untimely is Macbeth's response to Macduff's fixing of himself as rebuker and subduer, I am taking the play to characterize interpretation as a kind of inner or private contest between witchcraft and tyranny, which it almost identifies as a war between the feminine and the masculine. This formulation contests, while to an unassessed extent it agrees with, the perception of the play in Steven Mullaney's "Lying Like Truth." I agree particularly with Mullaney's sense that the play virtually announces its topic as, whatever else, equivocation, and that standing interpretations of equivocation, or ambiguity, do not account for the extraordinary language of this play. But, putting aside here Mullaney's elegant presentation of the play as a presentation of treasonous language (which nevertheless seems to me a confined interpretation), he cites too few of the actual words of the play to clarify his claim of their specialness. For example, he claims that the "language [Macbeth] would use [to lie] instead masters him." How shall we assess whether Mullaney's idea of being mastered comes to more than an assertion of one of the common facts of words, that they have associations beyond their use on a particular occasion? Certainly we must not deny it: A word's reach exceeds a speaker's grasp, or what's a language for?

This is to say: words recur, in unforetellable contexts; there would be no words otherwise; and no intentions otherwise, none beyond the, let me say, natural expression of instinct; nothing would be the expression of desire, or ambition, or the making of a promise, or the acceptance of a prophecy. Unpredictable recurrence is not a sign of language's ambiguity but is a fact of language as such, that there are words.

I strew my reservation concerning Mullaney's description of Macbeth's language with references to various of the play's famous topics—ambition, prophecy, promise—to register my awareness that in claiming, despite my reservation, to have a sense of the play's specialness of language, the weight of this reservation depends on proposing an alternative account. I shall sketch two elements of such a proposal, isolating two common features or conditions of the medium of the play—its language to begin with—that the text of Macbeth particularly acknowledges, or interprets. One can think of the idea of a text's uniqueness, or difference, as the theory of language the text holds of itself, as Friedrich Schlegel more or less puts it. I will call these features of language language as prophecy and as magic or mind-reading.

These features interpret conditions of what can be called the possibility of language as such. Prophecy, or foretelling, takes up the condition of words as recurrent; mind-reading takes up words as shared. Philosophy
has wished to explain the recurrence of words (which may present itself as their evanescence) by a theory of what it calls universals; and similarly (taking universals as concepts or as rules) to explain their sharing or mutuality, so far as this is seen to be a separate question. Wittgenstein's *Investigations* questions precisely the necessity and possibility of these places of philosophical explanation. In this light, *Macbeth* represents the world whose existence philosophy is horrified by, and created by—the possibility that there is no end to our irrationalities, to our will to intellectual emptiness.

My idea of the first of the conditions of language acknowledged by this play—language as prophecy—is that a kind of foretelling is effected by the way the play, at what prove to be charged moments, will bond a small group of generally small words so that they may then at any time fall upon one another and discharge or expel meaning. The play dramatizes the fact that a word does not exist until it is understood as repeated. Examples I specify a bit here are the foretelling of the words *face, hand, do* and *done, success and succession, time, sleep,* and *walk.* That the acknowledgement of words as foretelling is a specific strain within the Shakespearean virtuosity is indicated in contrasting it with words as telling or counting in *The Winter's Tale* (as recounted in *Disowning Knowledge*). Foretelling emphasizes the unpredictable time of telling, unguarded as it were from the time of understanding. Take the case of *do* and *done.* The word leaps from a witch's "I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do," to Lady Macbeth's "What's done cannot be undone," and Macbeth's "[I] wish the estate o' th' world were now undone." I take up the word from what is perhaps its most intricate instance: "If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly" (I, vii, 1-2).

As a statement is grammatically what can prove to be true or false, and be verified or modified, so a human action is what can prove to succeed or fail, and be justified or excused—words and deeds carry within themselves the terms, or intentions, of their satisfaction. With recurrence on my mind, and having said that without the recurrence of words there are no words (hence no expression beyond that of organic need, no expression, we might say, that contains desire), I hear Macbeth's speculation of deeds done in the doing, without consequence, when surcease is success, to be a wish for there to be no human action, no separation of consequence from intention, no gratification of desire, no showing of one's hand in what happens. It is a wish to escape a condition of the human which, while developing terms of Emerson's essay "Fate," I have described as the human fatedness to significance, ourselves as victims of intelligibility. And I have claimed that it is this perception that Wittgenstein captures in identifying the human form of life as that of language. Something of the sort is, I believe, meant in recent years when it is said that language speaks us, or that the self is created by language. The implication in these formulations seems often to be that we are not exactly or fully responsible for what we say, or that we do not have selves. And yet the only point of such assertions—cast in a skeptical tone—is to deny a prior stance or tone of metaphysics, a metaphysical "picture" of what it is to be responsible or to "have" a self (a picture no doubt at the service of politics, but what is not?). Such skeptical assertions would deny that the self is everything by asserting that it is nothing, or deny that we are in control of a present plenum of meaning by denying that we have so much as a single human hand in what we say. These assertions and denials of metaphysics are the victories of tyranny over witchcraft, Macbeth's occupation. Whose story is it that the self is self-presence, that meaning is the fullness of a word? It is not truer than it is false.

A famous registration of what I am calling the fatedness to significance is Freud's idea of the overdetermination of meaning in human action and passion. If we follow Jean Laplanche (in *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*) in watching the origins of human significance in the emergence of human sexuality, tracing the transfiguration of psychic drives out of biological instincts, then may we not further recognize in this origin of desire the origin of time, say of the delay or interval or containment in human satisfaction; hence the origin of the end of time, say of the repetitiveness of desire's wants and satisfactions; hence the origin of reality, say of something "beyond" me in which my satisfaction is provided, or not? Then we have a way of thinking about why Macbeth, in wishing for the success of his act to be a surcease of the need of action, for a deed that undoes doing, must (logically) wish for an end to time. For to destroy time is what he would, with paralyzing paradox, risk the future for: "that but this blow / Might be the be-all and the end-all—here, / But
here, upon this bank and shoal of time" (I, vii, 4-6). This is what "We'd jump the life to come" in favor of (whether the life to come is taken to mean the rest of his time, or the rest of time). Why? (And suppose the life to come suggests the life to come from him. He says that the worth of his kingship is bound up for him with the question of his succession. But we have just heard him say in effect that success would consist for him in surcease, in remaining, with respect to the act which is the type of the consequential—producing progeny—"unlinear," "unfruitful." Well, does he want babies or not? Is this undecidable? If we say so, then Macbeth is the picture of undecidability.)

Both he and Lady Macbeth associate doing, in addition to time, with thinking: "I am afraid to think what I have done," he says (II, ii, 50); and a few lines earlier she had said, "These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad" (II, ii, 32-33). If there were nothing done or to do there would be nothing to think about. Before we come to ponder what it is they have to think about, I note that the opposite of thinking in Macbeth's mind is sleep ("sore labour's bath, / Balm of hurt minds" (II, ii, 37-38), and that in acting to kill action and end time Macbeth "does murther Sleep" (II, ii, 35); so that in acting metaphysically to end thought he consigns himself absolutely to thinking, to unending watchfulness. Lady Macbeth at last finds a solution to the problem of thinking how not to think, when there is no obvious way not to think, in sleepwalking, which her witness describes as a version of watchfulness.

Before moving from language as foretelling to the second of the conditions of language which I hypothesize the play particularly to acknowledge—language as magic or mind-reading—I simply note two foretellings or occurrences of the idea of walking (or walking as sleeping) that bond with the ambiguity or reciprocity, real or imagined, of action without consequence, say of the active and the passive becoming one another. First, the witnessing Doctor's description of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking—"to receive at once the benefit of sleep, and do the effects of watching"—seems most literally a description of the conditions of a play's audience, and play-watching becomes, along with (or as an interpretation of) sleepwalking, exemplary of human action as such, as conceived in this play—yet another of Shakespeare's apparently unending figurations, or explorations, of theater; here, theater as the scene, and as the perception or witnessing of the scene, that is, of human existence, as sleepwalking. Macbeth's all but literal equivalent of sleepwalking is his walking, striding, pacing (all words of his), to his appointment to murder, led by "a dagger of the mind, a false creation" (II, i, 38), moving like a ghost (II, i, 56).

Another bonding of the idea of walking with that of acting without acting is Macbeth's description of life as "but a walking shadow; a poor player" (V, v, 24). While in this inaudibly familiar speech about all our tomorrows I remark that Macbeth has a use for something like the idea that life, construed as a tale, signifies nothing—he has, as said, been trying to achieve the condition of insignificance ever since his speech about ending time, and before that. That life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, like both mad Lady Macbeth and sad Macbeth and like the perhaps sane players playing them, is a tremendous thought, but not something Macbeth learned just now, upon hearing of his wife's death. Perhaps it is something he can say now, say for himself, now that she is dead—that human life does not, any more than a human player, signify its course for and beyond itself; it is instead the scene or medium in which significance is found, or not. She is apt to have found this idea unmanly, anyway as diverging from her point of view. To speak of a player who "struts and frets" is simply, minus the melodramatic mode, to speak of someone who walks and cares, hence signifies acting and suffering and talking about both in view of others, which pretty well covers the human territory. And what is wrong with strutting and fretting for an "hour on the stage" that is not wrong with time altogether? Is "signifying nothing" the decay of their having been "promised greatness" (favorite words of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in their opening speeches)? And is this announcement of greatness taken as a hint of pregnancy and issue, or is it perhaps the promise of exemption from time (if that is different); or is it, given the hints of religious contestation in the play, a charge against the promise of eternity, against something Macbeth calls, thinking of the Witches, the "metaphysical"? It is imaginable that Macbeth is taking revenge against any and all of these promises of consequence, perhaps against the idea of history as fulfilling promises.
Of course this speech about insignificance, or say inexpressiveness, is an expression of limitlessly painful melancholy; but again, that pain is not new to Macbeth, not caused by the news of his wife's death. His response to that news I find in full—before the metaphysics of time and meaning, so to speak, take over—to be: "She should have died hereafter; / There would have been a time for such a word." That is all. Is it so little? He says that like everything else that happens her death is untimely, as if not hers: nothing is on or in time when nothing is desired, when desire is nothing, is not yours. And he says that he is incapable of mourning now; and if not capable now, then when not? The wrong time for death is an ultimately missed appointment; no time for mourning death sets an ultimate stake in disappointment. Here is a view of human history, history as unmournable disappointment. Macbeth's speech goes on to explore it. Perhaps it is a perception Lady Macbeth perished in trying to protect her husband from. This is something he can say now, no longer protecting her from her failure to protect him. If so, then the play's study of history is a study of their relationship, this marriage. What is this marriage?

In arriving at … [this question]—What is this marriage, this relation between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth?—I opened what is for myself the encompassing question of why, in thinking about Shakespearean tragedy, I have previously avoided turning to this play. Two questions have, it seems forever, dogged me about Macbeth. What is the source of the attractiveness of this terrible pair? And why have I always felt intimate yet unengaged with their famous moments? As if I have and have not wanted to consider that this pair, representing the most extensive description the Shakespearean corpus devotes to an undoubted marriage (that of Cleopatra's with Antony is not undoubted), represents, to some as yet unmeasured extent, an always standing possibility of marriage itself.

Masculine disappointment together with feminine deflection of that disappointment indicates a more or less familiarly cursed marriage; and I was suggesting that the mood of "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" is informed by knowledge Macbeth brings onto the stage from the beginning. If that is so, then the events of the play, the ambition for and against greatness and exemption, are in defense against this knowledge. In asking what this marriage is we have crossed to the second of the conditions of language that I have been claiming this play particularly to acknowledge: the first was language as prophesy, as foretelling; the second is language as mind-reading, a particular sharing of words, as if by magic.

As foretelling in Macbeth may be contrasted with telling or counting in The Winter's Tale, so sharing words in Macbeth may be compared with sharing words in Coriolanus, namely with words figured as food; in Macbeth words may rather, it seems, be something like potions: "Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear" (I, v, 25-26). There recurrently seems to me a phantasm glancing in these words of Lady Macbeth, beyond the idea of her wishing to inspire her husband, or give him courage, through her words; some more literal or imagined posture in which she invades him with her essence. Anyone might note that the play associates the production of words with the production and reception of blood: "We but teach / Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return / To plague th' inventor. This even-handed justice / Commends th' ingredience of our poison'd chalice / To our own lips" (I, vii, 8-12); "M y gashes cry for help" / "So well thy words become thee, as thy wounds" (I, ii, 43-44), as if in a tragedy of blood—and in this one, as the Arden editor reports, blood is mentioned over one hundred times—words are wounds, and the causes of wounds. I am drawn to test for the phantasm I allude to because of my sense of the pairs of certain cursed marriages, as in a relation of a sort I have elsewhere called spiritual vampirism.

The idea of words as mind-reading is a conception of reading as such—or play-watching—reading the text of another as being read by the other. Uttering words as mind-reading is represented in the language of this marriage, in which each of the pair says what the other already knows or has already said; or does not say something the other does not say, either assuming the other knows, or keeping a pledge of silence. They exemplify exchanges of words that are not exchanges, that represent a kind of negation of conversation. For example: Macbeth prays to "let that be, / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see" (I, iv, 52-53), and Lady Macbeth is soon incanting "That my keen knife see not the wound it makes" (I, v, 52); again, she fears that he
is "without / The illness that should attend" ambition (I, v, 19-20), and later he says to her, "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill" (III, iii, 55); and earlier, Macbeth's letter tells Lady Macbeth that greatness is promised her, and she repeats this in her ensuing soliloquy as something promised him. And let us add that before she reads, while sleepwalking, the letter she has in that condition written herself, as a kind of script of the play (a suggestion of Marjorie Garber's), Macbeth at the opposite end of the play had already written a letter which forms a script for her words; the first words we hear her say are his. But my hypothesis is that the play's sense of mind-reading, of being trapped in one another's mind, in false, draining intimacies (the idea of vampirism), is expressed preeminently in what the pair of the marriage do not, or not in good time, say to, or say for, one another. I note three topics about which they are silent: the plan to kill Duncan, their childlessness, and the relation of Lady Macbeth to the witches. I imagine there are different causes for silence in the three cases.

The pair's initial implicitness to one another over the plan to kill Duncan means to me not that each had the idea independently but that each thinks it is the other's idea, that each does the deed somehow for the other. It is an omen that neither knows why it is done. This will come back.

The compulsively repeated critical sneer expressed in the question "how many children had Lady Macbeth?" expresses anxiety over the question of the marriage's sexuality and childlessness, as if critics are spooked by the marriage. But I speak for myself. Is there any good reason, otherwise, to deny or to slight the one break in Lady Macbeth's silence on the subject of her childlessness, her assertion that she has suckled a (male) child? There may be good reason for her husband to deny or doubt it, in his considering whose it might be. If we do not deny her assertion, then the question how many children she had is of no interest that I can see; the interesting question is what happened, in fact or in fantasy, to the child she remembers. (David Willbern, as I recall, in a fine essay suggests in passing that her suckling is a fantasy. If so, then what is the fantasy of remembering a (fantasied) child?) And if we do not deny or slight her assertion then the fate of the child is their question, a fact or issue for them of a magnitude to cause the magnitude and intimacy of guilt and melancholy Macbeth begins with and Lady Macbeth ends with. Its massive unspokenness is registered by the reverse of the procedure of the recurrence of words, namely by the dispersal or dissemination of words for birth throughout the play—deliver, issue, breed, labour, hatch'd, birthdom, bring forth. I would like to include the punning use of borne, repeated by Lenox in his nervously ironic "Men must not walk too late" speech (a nice instance of the prophetic or foretelling use of "walk," especially of Lady Macbeth's last appearance). This listing of terms for child-bearing perhaps tells us nothing about early references in the play to becoming great or to "the swelling act / Of the imperial theme" (I, iii, 128-29). But when one is caught by the power—it will not happen predictably—of the vanished child, one may wonder even over Lady Macbeth's response upon the initial entrance to her of Macbeth, "I feel now / The future in the present," which in turn is, and is not, Macbeth's perception of history. (A sense of pregnancy, but without assurance of reproduction, may suggest the monstrous as much as it does the sterile.)

Anticipating for some reason an especially negative reaction to the last instance of deflected birth and death I am about to adduce, I emphasize that I am not undertaking to persuade anyone of unspoken presence. I am testifying to something guiding me that I cannot distinguish from a valid intuition. If I do not eventually discover a satisfying tuition for it, I will have to give it up as a guide. Perhaps it is not an intuition of free interpretation but a dagger of the mind, precisely not to be followed. But if one could know this in advance, or settle it, there would be no spiritual danger of the kind criticism runs, no such acts and thoughts to be responsible for or to; one would be either a witch or a tyrant. I would like to say: The great responsibility of philosophy is responsiveness—to be awake after all the others have fallen asleep.

The instance I am thinking of is the opening human question of the play, I mean the first words spoken after the witches have delivered themselves of their opening questions and answers about their meeting again. Duncan enters and encounters something that brings forth his response, "What bloody man is that?" If we take it to heart that in this tragedy, or say medium, of blood, blood is associated both with death and with birth, and
that bloody figures and figures of children originate or appear from, as it were, the witches' cauldron, then this appearance of the questionable bloody man—as from the cauldron—may be seen to begin the play. It figures beginnings—of plays, of human actions—as consequences, as conclusions manifested, synthesized, conjured. The witches' cauldron accordingly appears as the origin of theater, as the scene of appearitions or appearances, and as the source or representation of the human as that which identifies and denies itself—or, as Hamlet virtually says, as that which imitates itself so "abominably," in the form of abominations, objects of horror to themselves.

That a first-night, or a first-day, audience may not at first recognize a connection between the bloody man and the cauldron is true enough, but not obviously more surprising than anything else not recognized, on the first, or on the hundred-and-first, encounter. I assume that any complexity the average mortal finds in a play of Shakespeare's is something Shakespeare is capable of having placed there. The critical question is: How? By what means? The question whether an author intends any or all of what happens is a convenient defense against this critical question. Recent attacks on intentionality share the (metaphysical) picture of intention that they would criticize, one that makes its importance absolute, as if, if intention counts for anything in meaning, it counts for everything. (We have seen the pattern before.) Metaphysics, so described, here concerning intention, might be called magic thinking. So let us say: Intention is merely of the last importance. Everything (else) has first to be in place for it to do what it does—as in putting a flame to a fuse. And of course accidents can happen. Would one like to imagine that the man of blood follows the witches' incantations by accident? Magicless, impotent witches are no easier to imagine than the other kind.

But I cannot stop the intuition here, the intuition of the magic of theater and its voices and its other apparitions, of the declaration of theater as the power of making things appear, along of course with the powers of equivocation and of casting spells. (Are only witches and warlocks so empowered? Or are they only convenient paranoid projections of what we accept as humdrum human power? Glendower's metaphysical claim to call up monsters, together with Hotspur's skeptical question as to whether they will come when he calls them, forms another instance of fixed philosophical sides that Shakespeare may be taken as bringing to confusion. Is this the accomplishment of philosophy, or its cue?) What has happened to Macbeth? What is the element of difference to his consciousness that brings forth his guilt and private violence and melancholy, as if settling something? This question draws me to imagine the bloody man—a poor player whom we never see again, who in Shakespeare's source was killed—against the question I impute to Macbeth (granted as it were that Lady Macbeth knows the answer) about what happened at the death and birth of his child. (Macbeth is not the only Shakespearean male to find birth mysterious and unnatural, who might believe anything about it and about those to whom and from whom it happens. This is cardinal in the essay of Janet Adelman's that I have cited in Part I.) I do not look for a stable answer to be found by Macbeth: he protests his acceptance and his doubt of the witches throughout. But that there are witches and that they bring forth children may provide him with a glance of explanation, perhaps of hope, perhaps of despair; an explanation at once of the presence of the absence of his child and of the absence in the presence of his wife.

I ask here only that we allow Macbeth to have posed for himself the issue that so many critics now so readily take as answered—that there is some inner connection between Lady Macbeth and witchery. Some approve the idea that in her opening scene she is casting a spell on herself ("unsex me here … fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full / Of direst cruelty" (I, v, 41-43)—though here I seem to have heard every interpretation of these frightening words except the one that seems unforced to me; that it expresses rage, human as can be, at the violence and obligation of sexual intercourse, at what Laplanche calls, in Life and Death in Psychoanalysis, the traumatic nature of human sexuality: her husband is returning any moment from the wars. And none fail to remark that she is presenting herself as a mother, in her fashion ("Take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers" ([I, v, 48])). If she is a witch it follows both that witches are mothers and presumably that she is capable of destroying their child with her own hands. (Is there a difference supposed in the pronunciation of "murth'ring" and "mothering"? Or is this identity a critical commonplace?)
We are, of course, in the middle of the third of the three topics I said the pair are silent about; the first two were their plan of Duncan's murder and their vanished child; the third is the topic and the logic of monstrousness. What is there for them to discuss about this? Others may speculate with detachment over the belief in witches, but it is the likes of Macbeth who, finding themselves confronted with witches, have to ask how you tell who is a witch (the commonest question there could be about witches); and have to carry through the logic that if anyone is a witch then his wife may be one; that hence he may be the master and the minister of a witch, figures named in the play (and he has perhaps tasted his wife's milk or gall and had her pour her spirits in his ear and felt chastised by the valor of her tongue, but I will not speculate here); hence that he has had a child with a witch, produced something monstrous that has to die, as if he were a devil, not a man (he is called "Hell-hound" by Macduff [V. viii, 3]). There is nothing to discuss: No individual human knows more than any other what the difference is between the human and the monstrous, as no human is exempt from the wish for exemption from the human. I mean no one is in a position to tell another that there are or are not witches, any more than to tell another that there are or are not humans.

Here is a way of considering this play's contribution to the continuing European discussion of witches contemporary with it—its sense of metaphysical denial (say denial of our fundamental metaphysical ignorance of difference between the human and the monstrous) projected through human society by legalizing the identification of witches. It seems to me just like Shakespeare to have already infiltrated this discussion (as noted in Disowning Knowledge) by coloring Othello's psychological torture of Desdemona (who, on the pattern of Lady Macbeth, is anything but a witch) as a witch trial—a sense of the erotic denial introduced into one's human identity by the projection of one's sense of bewitchment. (Another of Shakespeare's indirections with his sources is his hedging of Mark Antony, who, on the pattern of Coriolanus, is anything but a Christ, with signs of Christ.)

By the time of Macbeth's last encounter with the witches, at the opening of Act IV, he seems to have accepted his participation in their realm, undertaking, successfully, to "conjure" them (IV, i, 50). In the ensuing appearances or apparitions from the cauldron to Macbeth (and to us) of the armed head and of the bloody child and of the child crowned, we have the pattest declaration by the play of its theory of the work of theater as the conjuring of apparitions; and I am taking it, if you like in deferred action, to figure for us (and for Macbeth, whoever, in identification with us, he is), what we see (saw) when at the beginning we encounter(ed) the bloody man, the origin and destiny of his child, hence of himself. Now one may feel that all this takes Macbeth's sense of bewitchment or exemption to be a function of an incredible capacity for literalization on his part. But is it really more than is shown by his sense that he is to be dominated by a man who exists from no woman? Moreover, literalization is perhaps not so uncommon, but is an ordinary part of magic thinking, like imagining that to claim that an author means what he or she says is to claim that his or her intention has created all the conditions in conjunction with which intention does what it does, as if the striking match creates the fuse it lights, together with the anger and the enemy and the opportunity in and for and from which it is struck. (In a sense, no doubt, it does. What sense?)

To work toward a close of these remarks, one that takes them back to my opening intuitions of Macbeth as a history play that questions whether anything can be known—or known to be made—to happen, I come back to the murder of Duncan. What I have said or implied about this so far is that Macbeth walks to it in a sleep and that each of the pair acts it out as for the other, assuming its origination in the other, so that the desire for the deed and the time of the deed can never be appropriate, never quite intelligible. To raise the question of what it is that is thus done on borrowed time, with stolen words, let us take it that it is performed with that dagger of the mind Macbeth speculates might be the instrument of murder and ask what wound in the mind it makes, one that each of the pair asks not to see—which we now understand as impossibly asking the other not to see.

I pause to remark that it is probably the sense of their silence to one another about unsilenceable topics that has above all prompted critics to suggest that scenes are missing from the play. I am in effect claiming that
what is missing is not absent but is present in the play's specific ways of saying nothing, say of showing the
unspeakable. A methodological point of interest thus arises concerning the subject of what you might call
critical responsibility. My claim is that readers/watches of the play are meant to read its silences; that, in
effect, the speculation about a missing scene is a cover for the speculator's missing response to scenes that are
present. This implies that should, as it were, a missing scene show up for this play, it could prove neither the
truth nor the falsity of what I claim the silence is about. To accept such a scene is to be willing to rethink the
play; perhaps it would contain further silences. There is, by my definition, no scene missing from the play I
mean to be considering here, the one constituted in the Arden edition I cite from. (How many plays have the
Macbeths?)

My account of the pair's silence about the plan to kill Duncan depends here mostly on three elements that
indicate that they each imagine Macbeth's deathblow to direct itself to Lady Macbeth.

The first element is Macbeth's speech as he reenters from having gone, after the discovery of Duncan's body,
to see his handiwork: "From this instant, / There's nothing serious in mortality; / All is but toys" (II, iii,
90-92). Good readers have characteristically felt that something is horrifyingly disproportionate in these
words of Macbeth's, disagreeing about Macbeth's sincerity or degree of consciousness in saying them. My
sense is that these words cannot take their direction from the figure of Duncan, however they may recognize
his disfigurement; but that the only object whose loss for Macbeth could amount to the radical devaluation of
the human world is Lady Macbeth, together with some phantasm in the idea of "toys," as of some existence
left behind. (A measure of the disproportion in Macbeth's speech on Duncan's death—"nothing serious in
mortality"—is to set it with Cleopatra's on Antony's death—"nothing left remarkable / Beneath the visiting
moon" (IV, xv)—where I assume no sense of disproportion. How far this connection verifies my general
sense of these plays as history plays about a break in history, as turns in the history of privacy, or say
skepticism, hence in the history of marriage, hence in the history of legitimacy and succession, I do not guess
now.)

That Lady Macbeth shares this knowledge of herself as the object of the killing is how I take the second
element I cite in this connection, that of her fainting upon Macbeth's words that recount in vivid and livid
detail his killing of Duncan's grooms: "Who could refrain / That had a heart to love, and in that heart /
Courage, to make's love known?" (II, iii, 114-16). It is she alone who knows what Macbeth loves, to whom
whatever he does makes his love known. (But the sincerity or reality of her fainting is a matter of controversy.
Am I simply assuming it? I might say I have provided an argument in favor of its reality. But I would rather
say that it is still perfectly possible to insist that the fainting is insincere, put on by her to divert the attention
of the company, only this will now have to include her knowledge of what Macbeth's deed was in killing his
love; and then the idea of her insincerity will perhaps seem less attractive.) After Lady Macbeth is helped to
exit from this scene, she is never an active presence in the play's events. This is why the fact of her death
comes to Macbeth as no shock.

The third element in defining the object of Macbeth's killing is Lady Macbeth's entrance to him upon his
words, "I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself/
And falls on th' other" (I, vii, 25-26). By now I will take no one by surprise in expressing my sense that the
line should be left alone (I mean, to begin with, that it should not be taken to be incomplete) to nominate Lady
Macbeth as the other. (This at the same time leaves the line to mark this entrance as a cardinal declaration in
this play that its study or acknowledgment of theatrical entrances is of their quality as appearances or
apparitions, called forth, conjured.) Critics have wished to see in Macbeth's image of "overleaping" here an
image of himself as the rider of a horse, mounting it or jumping it, overeagerly. I do not say this is wrong; but
since Macbeth's words are that it is his intent whose sides are, or are not, to be pricked, there is a suggestion
that he is identifying himself also as the horse (as earlier he associates himself with a wolf and later identifies
himself as a baited bear); a horse by whom or by what ridden is unclear, ambiguous: perhaps it is by his
ambition, perhaps by the ambition of another, so that "falling on the other" means falling to the other, to be
responsible for it, but perhaps it means falling upon the other, as its casualty. Then the falling is not overeager, but an inevitable self-projection of human promise. (If one insists that not he but strictly his intent is the horse, he remaining strictly the rider, then again his intent out-runs his control not because of overeagerness but because of the separate lives of intention and of the world, we riding, as best we can, between.)

If we take it as ambiguous whether Macbeth is imagining himself as the rider or as the horse, the ambiguity is then an expression of the pair's mutual mind-reading, their being as it were overliterally of one mind: whatever occurs to one occurs to the other; whatever one does the other does; in striking at her he strikes at himself; his action is something he suffers. Sleepwalking seems a fair instance of a condition ambiguous as between doing something and having something happen to you. Other actions pertinent to this play, exemplary of the ambiguity or reciprocity of acting and suffering, or in Emerson's words, between getting and having, are giving birth and the play of sexual gratification. The reciprocity presents itself to Macbeth as requiring an assassination that trammels up consequence, all consequence, an act of metaphysics whose consequence is of being assassinated; as if acts of realizing your world, acts of self-empowerment, are acts of self-assassination, the openest case in which doing a deed and suffering the deed are inseparable. The logic is that of narcissism, and the sense is that there is a narcissism under a negative sign, with love replaced by hatred. You need not think that masculinity and femininity are determined by a prior determination of activity and passivity in order to think that prior to the individuation that begins individuating others—to the formation of the human self that is subject to others and subjects others, that knows passion and that knows action, that is bewitchable and tyrannical—there is nothing either decidable or undecidable about the self's gender. And if "being" a gender (one rather than another) is a mode like, or is part of, "having" a self (this one rather than another), is individuation ever over? There are always others to tell you so and others to tell you otherwise. Are they others?

A psychological account of the state in which punishment of an object (or former object) of love is a state of self-punishment is given by Freud in his statement of the etiology of melancholia. I shall quote some sentences from Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" and then close with a few sentences about why I find their association with Macbeth, through Nietzsche, significant, I mean why I want to follow them on.

An object-choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed; then, owing to a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was shattered. The result was not the normal one of a withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement of it onto a new one, but something different…. It was withdrawn into the ego … [where] it served to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, so that the [ego] could henceforth be criticized by a special mental faculty, the forsaken object…. The melancholic displays … an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in the melancholic, it is the ego itself.

"Impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale"—it seems a move in an auction of nothingness, self-punishment as for the murder, finally, of the world. Guilt as melancholia seems a reasonable formulation of Macbeth's frame of mind. It is a suggestion from which to reenter the texts from which I reported that I have begun asking tuition for my intuitions about this play.

The passages from "Mourning and Melancholia" just quoted were adduced a few years ago in Timothy Gould's study of Nietzsche's Pale Criminal (a figure in an early section of Thus Spoke Zarathustra), which appeared in the Summer, 1986 issue of Soundings. In readdressing the passages here I am in effect claiming that Nietzsche's Pale Criminal, whatever else, is a study of Macbeth. That section of Zarathustra speaks of guilt that expresses itself in madness after the deed and madness before the deed, and it proposes a problematic of blood and of human action in which performing a deed is taken over by an image of the performance of the deed, an image which functions to fixate or exhaust the doer's identity so that he becomes
nothing but the doer of this deed, suffering subjective extinction as it were in the doing of what he does. It speaks, accordingly, to why Macbeth thinks of himself (thinking shared, as it must be, by Lady Macbeth) as in a sea of blood of his own giving, so as pale. (Macbeth once asks "seeling Night," with its "bloody and invisible hand" to release him from that "which keeps me pale" [III, ii, 46-50] and in her sleepwalking Lady Macbeth will say, or say again, "Look not so pale … give me your hand" [V, i, 59, 63].) In a world of blood, to be pale, exceptional, exempt, without kin, without kind, is to want there to be no world, none outside of you, nothing to be or not to be yours, neither from nor not from your hand; but to be pale is to be drained and to demand blood, to absorb what is absorbing you.

And the bearing of Macbeth as Nietzsche's Pale Criminal is significant for me, to be followed on, because of Nietzsche's response (so I claim) to Emerson's "Experience," a centerpiece of the seminar on romanticism and skepticism I mentioned at the outset … of this essay. (Emerson's essay opens with the question, "Where do we find ourselves?" The introduction to Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals opens with the two sentences: "We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers. How should we have found ourselves when we have never looked for ourselves?") Emerson's "Experience" is about the inability, and the ability, to mourn the death of his five-year-old son; the essay works toward the discovery of the social, call it America, toward the discovery of succession, imaged by Emerson as coming to walk, to take steps, beginning in what is quite explicitly described as walking in your sleep. Emerson here responds to, takes responsibility for, Shakespeare's and Kant's and America's ideas of success and succession: in effect, he is claiming to enter history by becoming their successor. It is an essay, as I have put it in the first chapter of This New Yet Unapproachable America, where the image of the human hand emblematizes the question of how deeds enter and work in the world, the question of how, as Emerson phrases it, you "realize your world," something Emerson's critics, as he reports in his essay, keep complaining that he has himself failed to do. But realizing his world is of course precisely what Emerson takes himself to be doing, in his writing, in the way only humans can; nonmagically, as it were; by letting something happen, the reversal of denial. This is more or less, not for unrelated reasons, how Heidegger and Wittgenstein also think, so that what is most active is what is most passive, or receptive. This suggests that we do not know whether knowing—for example, knowing whether one is human or inhuman—is a masculine or a feminine affair.

I am citing bits of what might, in another world, be called the history of the reception of Macbeth, or part of its historical circulation or exchange or energy, say of its money or blood of the mind, as a way of saying that if Shakespeare's play is a distinctive event in the history it remembers and enacts—if it is to continue to happen to its culture, to the extent that it, or anything, has ever happened to its culture as art happens, as truth happens in art, not alone as conclusion but as premise, not alone as document but as event—that is because events happen as this work shows them to happen, contains them, no more nor less clearly. In emphasizing, rather than Shakespeare's sources, Shakespeare's writing as a source variously open to appropriation, I may find my own provocation in it, without claiming to speak for it—as for example fixing its own mode of appropriating sources. Then I am in effect claiming that the Shakespearean play here claims a power to challenge authority that is based on birth and inheritance; that the political as realm of royal blood never recovers from this portrait which locates its causes in unsayable privacy (as in this marriage), in royal authority's sleek imitability (as in Malcolm's apparent libeling of himself, and in Macbeth's bloody hand as the imitation and inheritor of the king's healing touch); nor recovers from its support by treasonableness in expansive masculinity (as in Macduff); nor from its vanity (as in Banquo's narcissistic mirror).

So I am in effect verifying the familiar idea that a Shakespeare history play develops from the morality tradition, but taking its moral direction to put a kink in the old history—taking it not as directed to teach the proper conduct of king and subject, but instead to constitute a moral about what history is, or has become—that what happens is not what is news, not a tale of a world, real or fictional; that such things are accounts merely of trivial horrors, consequences of old deeds, revenge returning, as Macbeth learns, as kings typically learn, too late; that learning what has happened is exemplified by the learning of what is happening now, or as Emerson more or less puts the matter, that history is not of the past, but for example is in our
sleep-watching of this play; so that you need not become a horror-dealing, horror-dealt tyrant in order to recognize what is worth doing and worth having. And might you learn how not to become the victim of a tyrant? But what if, after the passing of tyrants, you yourself play the confiner?

**Macbeth (Vol. 29): Supernatural Elements**

Stanley Wells (essay date 1994)


[Wells is an English educator and critic whose books include Shakespeare: The Writer and His Work (1978) and Shakespeare: An Illustrated Dictionary (1978). In the following essay, Wells discusses Shakespeare's politics, characterizations, and portrayal of the supernatural in Macbeth.]

*Macbeth* has a well-deserved reputation as one of Shakespeare's most sheerly exciting plays, a fast-moving murder story laced with witchcraft and offering the theatrical pleasures of a ghost, apparitions, a sleepwalking scene, and climactic battles culminating in a hand-to-hand combat in which the villain-hero is killed by his virtuous adversary. Macbeth himself is more like Richard II than any of the intervening tragic protagonists. Both men are great warriors who come to the throne not by warfare but by murder. Both sink further and further into blood as they struggle to extricate themselves from the consequences of their deeds, and both are tormented by conscience. The fates of both men are inextricably linked with those of their countries, and each of them is finally defeated in personal combat by a representative of the forces of virtue who thereby purges the state of evil and restores the health of the nation. Each play, too, is concerned not with some remote or fictitious country but with a period or setting related closely to the lives of its first audiences. *Richard the Third* ... ends with the triumph of the grandfather of Queen Elizabeth, the reigning sovereign at the time it was written. In *Macbeth* Shakespeare portrays a supposed ancestor—Macbeth's comrade, Banquo—of her successor, James I, and draws attention to the continuity of the line in a strange episode which makes the connection explicit.

*Macbeth* was written probably in 1606; King James VI of Scotland had come to the English throne in 1603, and soon afterwards Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, came under royal patronage as the King's Men. While it seems simplistic and reductive to suggest that Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* to flatter King James, there are enough points of contact between play and sovereign to make it likely at least that as he wrote he had his royal patron's tastes and interests in mind.

Set in Scotland, the play opens thrillingly with the appearance in thunder and lightning of three witches, who are to figure prominently in the action. Witchcraft was widely practised in Shakespeare's time, and James had a special interest in it—with good reason, since at one time several Scottish women were trying hard to destroy him by methods such as casting into the sea cats bound to the severed joints of dead bodies with the hope of raising storms while James was sailing to Denmark. At their trial in 1591 it was said that they had asked the devil why their spells had failed, to receive the reply 'Il est un homme de dieu'—a phrase echoed in *Macbeth* when Banquo, James's ancestor, claims 'I n the great hand of God I stand' (2.3.132). James's own credulous book on the subject, *Demonology*, had appeared in Edinburgh in 1597, and was reprinted in London in the year of his accession. His investigations resulted in the detection of so many frauds that as time passed his credulity waned, but in 1616, years after *Macbeth* was written, he investigated a case at Leicester in which he heard of a boy who suffered from fits. The boy's symptoms were not understood to be the result of natural illness, he made accusations of witchcraft, and as a result nine people had been hanged and another six were in prison awaiting trial. The King managed to get the boy to confess that his accusations were fraudulent and those in prison were released; not much could be done about the others, though James did rebuke the judges

220
for carelessness in having had them put to death.

More direct links with James come in Shakespeare's portrayal of Banquo. In Holinshed's *Chronicles*, where Shakespeare found the story, Banquo is implicated in the murder of King Duncan; in the play, though he is subjected to the same kind of temptation as Macbeth, Shakespeare causes him to withstand it. There is good dramatic reason for this, but it may reasonably be interpreted also as a sensible diplomatic move when one considers the episode, scarcely required by the action (and often cut in more recent performance), in which Banquo's bloodstained spirit appears to Macbeth pointing to a show of eight kings, the last bearing a glass which, says Macbeth,

shows me many more; and some I see
That twofold balls and treble sceptres carry.

(4.1.136-7)

This clear allusion to James's unifying of the kingdoms of England and Scotland, symbolized by his investiture with two sceptres and one orb, breaks the play's timebarrier to link the historic action not merely with the time of the play's original performance but beyond that, since then James was the only king to have been so crowned. Whether the description of the English king Edward II I touching for the King's Evil (4.3.140-59) would have been pleasing to James is a moot point; its presence in the play can be justified on aesthetic and intellectual grounds, but again it has often proved dispensable, and Malcolm's statement that the King 'To the succeeding royalty … leaves The healing benediction' (4.3.156-7) is easily seen as a strained compliment to that same 'succeeding royalty'.

The matter is complicated by the state of the only surviving text, which shows signs of adaptation. It is Shakespeare's shortest surviving tragedy, and includes episodes (3.5, and parts of 4.1) that there is good reason to believe are not by Shakespeare. These episodes feature Hecate, who does not appear elsewhere; they are composed largely in octosyllabic couplets in a style conspicuously different from the rest of the play; and they call for the performance of two songs, identified in the original version of *Macbeth* only by their opening words, that survive in full in *The Witch*, a play of uncertain date by Thomas Middleton, who appears to have collaborated with Shakespeare on *Timon of Athens*. It seems likely that Middleton, for reasons unknown, adapted Shakespeare's play some years after it first appeared.

The play's framework of national destiny has proved less attractive to later ages than the personal tragedy of Macbeth played within it; many modern productions adjust the text to throw even more emphasis on Macbeth and his Lady, some even suggesting that the action takes place entirely within Macbeth's mind. There are signs that Shakespeare himself found the depiction of national and political issues the less inspiring part of his task, particularly in the long (well, it always seems long) scene in which Malcolm, the rightful heir to the Scottish throne, tests the integrity of Macduff, who is leading the rebellion against the tyrant, by pretending that he would make a far worse ruler even than Macbeth. Intellectually, as critics have laboured to show, the scene is entirely justifiable, and the writing is never less than competent, but the dramatic mode seems artificial and stilted by comparison with that of the bulk of the play, and the emotional temperature is low; it seems significant that here (as in the opening scene of *Henry the Fifth*) Shakespeare's wording is close to that of his historical source, as if he were dutifully versifying history rather than being taken over by it.

Theatrical emphasis upon the figures of Macbeth and his Lady is justified by Shakespeare's technique of character portrayal in this play. In, for example, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* he uses his stylistic virtuosity to bestow the impression of individuality on a wide range of characters so that even minor roles—like the servant, Peter, and the Apothecary in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the courtier Osric and the gravediggers in *Hamlet*—have their own distinctive voices. This is not how he works in *Macbeth*. Here, as if to draw attention to the play's moral and ethical structure, even major roles are drained of individuality. In Holinshed, for example, Duncan is a weak king, too 'soft and gentle of nature', 'negligent … in punishing offenders', 'slothful'
to the point of cowardice. Shakespeare builds him up into a symbol (rather than a portrait) of an ideal king. True, he is not a warrior, but this is not made a ground for criticism, and although there is nothing in the text to show how old he is, it is probably a sound tradition to play him as an old man. Everyone treats him with respect and affection, he is generous in praise and honours where they are due, and in return he receives the love and duty of his subjects. To Macbeth he is 'the gracious Duncan' who

Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against
The deep damnation of his taking-off.

(1.7.17-20)

Above all, he is a king: Shakespeare stresses throughout the play the holiness of true kingship. Duncan's murder is compared to sacrilege, to the desecration of a temple. When his body is discovered, Macduff cries:

Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope
The Lord's anointed temple and stole thence
The life o'th' building.

(2.3.66-8)

Duncan is the sort of role—there are many of them in this play—that an actor probably does not get much fun out of playing. He is important not as a personality but for the associations he is made to carry: of generosity, fruitfulness ('I have begun to plant thee,' he says to Macbeth, 'and will labour / To make thee full of growing' [1.4.28-9]), grace and sanctity. With his murder these virtues lose sway in Scotland; the need for them in a well-run commonwealth is impressed on us again briefly towards the end of the play, in the English scene, when we hear of the King of England to whom sick people are brought for cure: a virtuous king brings practical benefits.

Banquo is similarly treated. In Holinshed we are told of Macbeth that, 'communicating his purposed intent with his trusty friends, amongst whom Banquo was the chiefest, upon confidence of their promised aid he slew the King at Inverness'. In Holinshed Macbeth has Banquo killed not because, as in Shakespeare, he fears his 'royalty of nature', but simply because of the prophecy that Banquo's descendants would inherit the throne. There are good artistic as well as political reasons for this change: to have given Macbeth any accomplice other than his wife would have diminished his stature. And Shakespeare needs a representative, not of the ideal good against which Macbeth sins in murdering Duncan, but rather of a more normal human attitude, though still a virtuous one, that will help to keep Macbeth in perspective. We see Banquo first with Macbeth, but immediately a distinction between them is established. Though both hear the witches' prophecies, their reactions differ. Macbeth seeks a way of bringing them to pass, whereas Banquo treats them simply as unfulfilled prophecies—and ones that may have come from the devil's emissaries. Increasingly Banquo is aligned rather with Duncan than with Macbeth; they two share the passage about the temple-haunting martlet (1.6.1-9) that helps to associate them with the fruitful forces of nature, and although Banquo lacks Duncan's halo of sanctity, he possesses 'royalty of nature', courage, and 'a wisdom that doth guide his valour / To act in safety' (3.1.51,54-5).

The real parting of the ways between him and Macbeth comes just before Macbeth murders Duncan. Banquo has been disturbed by his encounter with the witches: strange thoughts trouble him—whether an awareness of temptation in himself or a suspicion of Macbeth is, perhaps deliberately, left uncertain. Sleepless, he prays that the 'Merciful powers' will restrain in him 'the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose'. He tells Macbeth of his dreams:
I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters.
To you they have showed some truth.

Macbeth replies in lines that brilliantly suggest an uncertainty of how far he can go with Banquo:

I think
not of them;
Yet, when we can entreat an hour to serve,
We would spend it in some words upon that
business
If you would grant the time.

Banquo agrees:

At your kind' st leisure.

And Macbeth seems encouraged to go further:

If you shall cleave to my consent when 'tis,
It shall make honour for you.

But now Banquo withdraws:

So I lose none
In seeking to augment it, but still keep
My bosom franchised and allegiance clear,

I shall be counselled.

(2.1.19-28)

It is a measure of Shakespeare's subtlety in composing a dialogue of nuance that Banquo can express both to
Macbeth and to us his imperviousness to temptation without actually having been tempted.

From this point on, Macbeth is alone with his wife; he has severed his last link with normal humanity. When
Banquo hears of Duncan's murder he makes his position unequivocally clear:

Fears and scruples shake us.
In the great hand of God I stand, and thence
Against the undivulged pretence I fight
Of treasonous malice.

(2.3.128-31)

Macbeth's awareness of Banquo's suspicions, and his anxiety to ensure that the succession shall fall to his own
descendants, are no doubt powerful reasons for the attempted assassination of Banquo and his son, but still
more powerful is the awareness that Banquo's presence causes in him of the evil to which he has succumbed.
As he thinks of Banquo, he becomes possessed by consciousness of his sin:

For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind,
For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered,
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace
Only for them, and mine eternal jewel

(2.3.128-31)
Given to the common enemy of man
To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings.
(3.1.66-71)

To the audience, Banquo stands as a measure of normality against which the lack of balance in the mind of the tragic hero can be measured. To Macbeth he is as it were an embodied conscience, not to be stilled even by death.

In Duncan and Banquo, then, Shakespeare was less intent on 'creating character' than on fashioning the component parts of a balanced composition. Even greater bareness of characterization is to be seen in many of the other figures of the play. Caithness, Mentieth, Lennox, Ross, Angus—they sound like extracts from a tour guide to the Highlands, and have no more individuality than decreasingly important railway stations along a minor branch line.

Even more obvious stylization is to be found in the play's representatives of evil. The three witches are a theatrical problem: too often far more of a nightmare for the director than for the audience. Members of Shakespeare's original audience would have been closer to the practice of witchcraft than most of us, for whom bearded women savour more of sideshows at a fair than of someone living at the other end of the village whom one believed, and who believed herself, to have supernatural powers of evil action. Shakespeare presents the witches from, so to say, a position of belief: not as women pretending to other people that they have supernatural powers, but as creatures who genuinely believe themselves to have such powers, and who visibly accomplish deeds for which no rational explanation is offered. They can apparently think as one, continuing and completing each other's sentences, they have not only the appurtenances of human witchcraft—a cauldron, horrible things to cast into it which they represent as, for instance,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Root of hemlock, digged i'th' dark,} \\
\text{Liver of blaspheming Jew,} \\
\text{Gall of goat, and slips of yew} \\
\text{Slivered in the moon's eclipse,} \\
\text{Nose of Turk, and Tartar's lips,} \\
\text{Finger of birth-strangled babe} \\
\text{Ditch-delivered by a drab—} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(4.1.25-31)

they can not only vanish in a manner that is convincing at least to Macbeth and Banquo (though in the theatre we may be conscious of the trickery by which it is done) but they can also call up apparitions for which no rational explanation seems possible either to those who see them in the play or to us. The vagueness that surrounds them—our uncertainty as to the exact nature of their powers—creates a sense of disembodiment, so that we feel them as an emotion—three wicked shudders—rather than see them as people. Theatre directors have to have them represented by actors, but their horror may be better conveyed by not taking Shakespeare's implicit stage directions too literally than by having them chuck into a cauldron plastic spiders and the like that are no more frightening than the sort of Hallowe'en horrors that can be bought from a children's joke shop. [In the RS C production of 1986] Adrian Noble got a much better effect by having them roll round their mouths bits of bread left over from the Macbeths' feast and then slowly spew them out.

The witches confound our sense of reality. Their evil counterbalances the virtues projected in, especially, Banquo and Duncan; they are anti-natural, and—even more importantly to the effect of this play—they are equivocal, blurring distinctions between what is and is not. The equivocal is frightening, and its omnipresence in Macbeth is what makes this such a frightening play. It reminds us that there is indeed more in heaven and earth than philosophy can account for, reawakening the subconscious fears that we normally keep suppressed, frightening us by its sense of dangers lurking behind things familiar, of what Shakespeare's contemporary
Thomas Nashe called 'the terrors of the night', sudden unidentifiable shrieks, movement where we had expected stillness, a knocking at the door at dead of night, motiveless attacks, nightmares that terrify us even though we know them to be dreams, the possibility that ghosts really do exist. It turns us all into children, frightened to watch yet too fascinated to stop watching....

The witches are the catalysts to this fear, the equivocal aspects of their being announced with wonderful compression in the brilliant little opening scene:

When shall we three meet again?

In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

When the hurly-burly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

That will be ere the set of sun.

Where the place?

Upon the heath.

There to meet with Macbeth.

I come, Grimalkin.

Paddock calls.

Anon.

Fair is foul, and foul is fair,
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

The disturbance of the weather, the hurly-burly of warfare, the turmoil in nature when fair is foul and foul is fair, when values are reversed, all help to create the sense of evil as a denial of nature, a disturber of the peace, yet at the same time something which is itself, however mysteriously, in and of nature. The idea recurs throughout the play, not only in relation to the central characters but in, for instance, Lennox's description of the storm on the night of the murder, when 'the earth / Was feverous and did shake' (2.3.59-60), in the choric episode between an Old Man and Ross recounting the horrors of the night, 'unnatural, / Even like the deed that's done' (2.4.10-11), and in the crimes of which Malcolm falsely accuses himself. But it is not simply that things behave in a manner that is contrary to nature: at the same time they appear to be what they are not. Not only does what has been fair become foul; it retains its fair appearance, so that it is simultaneously fair and foul. This idea again is carried through the play with ever deepening irony: 'There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face', says Duncan about the thane of Cawdor: 'He was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust' (1.4.11-14)—and at that moment enters Macbeth, the new thane of Cawdor whose treachery will exceed that of his predecessor; 'look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't', says Lady Macbeth to her husband (1.5.64-5); 'This castle hath a pleasant seat', says Duncan on entering the building where, we know, he will be murdered (1.6.1); 'False face must hide what the false heart doth know', says Macbeth shortly before he kills Duncan (1.7.82).

Equivocation comes before us almost in person in the grimly comic figure of the Porter who so often tempts directors to rend the play apart by the way he is played, presumably under the illusion that Shakespeare not only expected but desired his clowns to speak more than is set down for them, to break the play's continuity.
with a display of comic virtuosity, not to say vulgarity. Shakespeare gives his clowns all they need, and all we need from them; the Porter's comedy is of the play, not excrescent to it, he is porter at once of Macbeth's castle and of hell-gate, his drunken fantasies are the counterpart of Macbeth's hallucinations, and, admitting an 'equivocator that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, but could not equivocate to heaven' (2.3.8-9), he reminds us of Macbeth's willingness to 'jump the life to come'. 'I had thought to have let in some of all professions that go the primrose way to th'everlasting bonfire': in that characteristic pun on the word 'professions' we are reminded of those who profess themselves other than they are, the serpent under the flower. Possessed of the throne, Macbeth and his Lady

Must lave our honours in these flattering streams
And make our faces vizors to our hearts,
Disguising what they are.

(3.2.34-6)

Malcolm, who is really virtuous, makes himself appear wicked as a means of testing Macduff's integrity; thus 'fair', by making itself appear 'foul', proves the truth of Macduff's apparent fairness.

Above all, equivocation is expressed through and in the witches and other people's reactions to them. Banquo sees that things may not be as fair as they seem; some doubt seems latent even in his encouraging remark to Macbeth when they two together first hear the prophecies:

Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair?

(1.3.49-50)

And he asks them 'T'eth name of truth, / Are ye fantastical or that indeed / Which outwardly ye show?' He remains severely sceptical, while Macbeth is carried away on a flood of speculation. Banquo's warning note is clear enough, and important as an anticipation of what is to come: 'oftentimes', he says, 'to win us to our harm / The instruments of darkness tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles to betray's / In deepest consequence' (1.3.121-4). But Macbeth, while seeing that the direction his thoughts are taking may be an evil one, will not face up to the need to make a clear judgement:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good …
function
Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not.

(1.3.129-41)

This deeply human awareness of the anomalous in his own nature, the sense of an undertow of evil cutting beneath the bank and shoal of time, is one of the things that make Macbeth's plight so moving, and cause us to be more deeply involved with him than with Banquo. Banquo is in the great hand of God; Macbeth is a cause of greater concern just because his judgement is less clear.

The overt expression of the witches' equivocal nature comes in the set of prophecies delivered by the apparitions in the cauldron scene (4.1). In spite of Banquo's warning, Macbeth continues to place his trust in the weird sisters; he accepts their oracular statements at face value; these prophecies do indeed seem fair, it does seem impossible that Birnam Wood will come to Dunsinane, and there seems no reason why Macbeth should not feel confident after he is told that 'none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth'. But after all, the first apparition has warned him against Macduff: 'beware Macduff, / Beware the thane of Fife', and it is at his own risk that he, who has been so apt to create a false impression, should take their other statements at face
value. It is Macbeth's powers of self-deception that bring about his final overthrow. The ambiguous nature of the witches symbolizes the power of choice that he is given, and in the play's last minutes we have a vivid visual symbol of the destructive force of his self-deception when the army led by Malcolm and Macduff adopts the device of carrying the branches of trees as camouflage, so that it seems as if Birnam Wood really did move towards Dunsinane. The tables are turned; Macbeth's bloody instructions return to plague the inventor; the fair appearances of evil are foul at heart.

The army that brings the tyrant's reign to an end comes to its victory bearing 'leafy screens'. Besides providing a climactic false appearance, the action also, in its use of the green branches of trees, reminds us of the good things of nature, and of their association during the course of the play with the virtuous characters and with the good way of life in man and in the state. Duncan and Banquo have been associated in our minds with growth and with fruitfulness. On the other side are the weird sisters, inevitably associated with forces opposed to nature: with storm and tempest, savagery and murder. Caught in the middle are the play's central figures, Macbeth and his Lady. In both of them we witness a conflict between natural and unnatural forces.

The evil within Macbeth and his Lady constantly finds expression in a need to suppress natural human feeling. So in a great invocation Lady Macbeth makes a fiercely conscious effort to subdue her womanhood:

Come,
you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
To cry 'Hold, hold!'

(1.5.39-53)

The speech, impressive in itself, reverberates through the play. 'Come to my woman's breasts,/ And take my milk for gall' is recalled soon afterwards when, inciting her husband to murder Duncan, she declares:

I have
given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, and I so sworn
As you have done to this.

(1.7.54-9)
'Milk' becomes something of a symbol of merciful nature, prepared for by Lady Macbeth's statement that her husband's nature 'is too full o' th' milk of human kindness' (1.5.16-17) and recalled when Malcolm deceptively declares that he would

Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell,
Uproar the universal peace, confound
All unity on earth.

(4.3.99-101)

Similarly, Lady Macbeth's invocation to night is soon to be paralleled by Macbeth's:

Come,
seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale.

(3.3.47-51)

The play is full of similar links: its poetic texture is dense, creating a claustrophobic, self-contained world: words such as 'blood' and 'night' recur again and again, accumulating fresh and more complex associations all the time.

In the earlier part of the play the subjugation of natural instincts seems easier for Lady Macbeth than for her husband. There is an exultant ring to her declarations of savagery: she cannot understand her husband's mental torment. He has to 'bend up … each corporal agent' to what he admits to be a 'terrible feat' (1.7.79-80); contemplating his bloodstained hands, he cries in agony:

Ha,
they pluck out mine eyes.
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will
rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.

(2.2.57-61)

But his wife takes a more severely practical point of view:

A little water clears us of this deed.
How easy is it then! Your constancy

Hath left you unattended.

(2.2.65-7)

For her 'The sleeping and the dead / Are but as pictures' for him the mere thought of the unnaturalness of his contemplated deed conjures up a horrified vision of the universe in mourning:

this
Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against
The deep damnation of his taking-off,
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye
That tears shall drown the wind.
(1.7.16-25)

At first, then, there is a clear contrast between the two. As the play progresses their roles are reversed. Lady Macbeth's imagination begins to work. Both of them, who had called upon night to cover their deeds, find that Macbeth 'hath murdered sleep' (2.2.40); they are afflicted nightly with terrible dreams; they had turned day into night, and now their own nights are rendered indistinguishable from day. Lady Macbeth had denied imagination. She had committed the mistake of those referred to by Lafeu in All's Well that Ends Well who 'make modern and familiar things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear' (All's Well that Ends Well, 2.3.2-6). The 'unknown fear'—fear of the unknown—is terribly present from the start to Macbeth; he denies it after great struggle. Lady Macbeth seems not to fear it at all; but when her imagination begins to work her 'seeming knowledge' gives way to the horrified questionings of the sleepwalking scene which shows with an extraordinary anticipation of the theories of Freudian psychology the release in sleep of the subconscious fears and other emotions that Lady Macbeth had succeeded in suppressing in her waking life. She had thought that a little water would clear her of her deed; now she finds that 'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand' (5.1.48-9). She ends in a mental disintegration revealing her 'great perturbation in nature'.

Macbeth's progress is in the opposite direction. In him we see a slow death of the imagination, proceeding from an extreme sensibility through great though self-inflicted suffering to a state of almost complete emotional sterility. He has denied the prompting of nature. By usurping the throne he has plunged his country into unnatural turmoil. He has tried to restore order, but his crime makes this impossible; so the banquet, traditional symbol of social harmony, which begins in order—'You know your own degrees; sit down' (3.4.1)—is broken by the entry of Banquo's ghost, reminder of the host's crime, and ends in disorder—'Stand not upon the order of your going, / But go at once.'

Gradually Macbeth finds himself forced by sheer impetus of accumulated evil into a career of escalating crime: 'I am in blood / Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er' (3.4.135-7). He becomes a mass murderer—no wonder the play has continued to seem relevant to the twentieth century—committing his worst crimes with none of the awareness of evil that he had felt in murdering Duncan:

The castle of Macduff I will surprise,
Seize upon Fife, give to th'edge o' th' sword
His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
That trace him in his line.
(4.1.166-9)

The bonds of nature are seen to be indivisible in the external and the internal world. Macbeth had desired to 'Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond / Which keeps me pale' (3.2.50-1), but his crimes against external nature are against his own nature, too, and this brings retribution, retribution that he had himself foreseen, the retribution of an 'even-handed justice'. He had expressed his willingness to 'jump the life to come' (1.7.7), but the very phrase is ambiguous: he finds that he is plunged into hell not in a life after death but in a death in life.
His expressions of pretended suffering on the discovery of Duncan's body forecast the suffering that he is already beginning to undergo:

Had I but died an hour before this chance
I had lived a blessed time, for from this instant
There's nothing serious in mortality.
All is but toys, Renown and grace is dead.
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of.

(2.3.90-5)

At this stage we still hear some of the hyperbole of conscious dissimulation; later comes a piercing, realized vision of despair that comes purely from the private world:

My
way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have, but in their stead
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath
Which the poor heart would fain deny but dare not.

(5.3.24-30)

Macbeth has, as he says, 'supped full with horrors' (5.5.13); he is scarcely capable of emotional response: 'I have almost forgot the taste of fears' (5.5.9); and so when news arrives of his wife's death his reaction is less a statement of personal grief than a denial of the validity of human emotion. This is Shakespeare's way of showing us the dust and ashes of Macbeth's self-destroyed soul:

She should have died hereafter.
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(5.5.16-27)

Up to a point, Macbeth offers the satisfactions of fiction as defined by Oscar Wilde's Miss Prism: 'The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily.' But the play's morality is not as simple as this. Macbeth's 'Tomorrow' speech is a meditative point of repose before the turmoil of the conclusion. But his despair is not absolute. As the witches' equivocations are stripped bare, as he hears how Birnam Wood 'began to move' (5.5.33), he pulls himself together with a last assertion of physical heroism: 'Blow wind, come wrack, / At least we'll die with harness on our back' (5.5.49-50); he refuses to 'play the Roman fool' (5.10.1), and remains courageous to the end. Shakespeare gives him no dying speech. He defies Macduf even after learning that his enemy was
'from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped' (5.10.15-16), goes out fighting, and returns only to be slain.

This did not satisfy later adapters. Sir William Davenant, in his Restoration version of about 1663, gave Macbeth a moralizing last speech: 'Farewell, vain world, and what's most vain in it—Ambition.' And when David Garrick revived the play in 1744 he added a considerably longer dying speech that seems indebted to Marlowe's Doctor Faustus:

'Tis done! the scene of life will quickly close.
Ambition's vain, delusive dreams are fled,
And now I wake to darkness, guilt and horror.
I cannot bear it! Let me shake it off.—
'Twa' not be; my soul is clogged with blood.
I cannot rise! I dare not ask for mercy.
It is too late, hell drags me down. I sink,
I sink—Oh!—my soul is lost forever.
Oh! (Dies)

That is banal because it is too explicitly moral. Both Davenant and Garrick reduce the play to a demonstration of the folly of ambition, and Garrick makes the hero condemn himself to a hell which is far less appalling than the vision of desolation that Shakespeare had already caused him to express on hearing of his wife's death.

The ending of Shakespeare's play shifts the focus from the personal to the political; Macduff's entrance with Macbeth's severed head—a reversion to an earlier dramatic mode that is often softened in modern productions—signals a happy ending for Scotland if not for the play's central characters who, in Malcolm's closing speech, are dismissed as 'this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen'. But this is even more of an over-simplification than Mark Antony's assessment of Brutus, a reduction to two-dimensionality of characters whom we have experienced with three-dimensional vividness. Though Macbeth is a profoundly moral play, it is not, like Malcolm, moralistic.

François Laroque (essay date 1989)


[In the following excerpt, Laroque explores the mythical tradition—Homer, Seneca, Lucan, Norse and Germanic legends—that Shakespeare may have drawn upon in his portrayal of the supernatural.]

The word 'magic' is one spontaneously and traditionally associated with a play defined as "a statement of evil" [L. C. Knights, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" An Essay in the Theory and Practice of Shakespeare's Criticism, 1933]. Evil is here essentially felt and visualized through the specific early Scottish background of Macbeth—with its weird sisters, its ghosts, its murky air and moving wood. It indeed creates an atmosphere of increasing horror that suggests a headlong fall into the recesses of an Inferno which is simultaneously Christian and pagan, Homeric as well as Dantean.

At the same time, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the word magic itself hardly ever appears in the text of the play (only once in III.5.26, and that is in the controversial 'Hecate' scenes), and that, other than in the stage directions in the Folio, Shakespeare only refers to the so-called witches as the Weird Sisters. After using magic as an essentially verbal and metaphoric web of meaning in his earlier great tragedies, Shakespeare makes us feel what the thing itself, rather than the word, looks and sounds like.

In this respect, it is rather curious that the earliest specific reference to a performance of Macbeth (on 20 April 1611), which is in the Bocke of Plaies of the astrologer and magician Simon Forman, fails to mention the
relevant magic scenes, which made some critics suspect the text was just another of John Payne Collier's forgeries.

Magic mostly concerns the paraphernalia of witchcraft whose outlines I will analyse with particular emphasis on the milk images and on the cauldron scene, which present a vision of perverted maternity. These provide a verbal and visual counterpart for the *deed without a name* achieved by the witches and for the *horrors* which Macbeth says he has supped full with (V.5.13). These scenes, which are highly spectacular and even sensational in terms of stage effects are all dependent on a vast body of myth gathered from Homer, Seneca and Lucan mainly but which also capitalizes on Norse legend or on Germanic elements, as in the Birnam wood scenes. Continental witchcraft sources are also important as the Weird Sisters do not exactly behave like most of their English or Scottish counterparts.

The topic of magic is one that has been copiously discussed and documented by various critics, historians or anthropologists and the evidence which has been produced seems as impressive as it is often finally inconclusive. My purpose here is to focus on a number of mythical archetypes or prototypes, mostly found in literary sources and thus theoretically accessible to Shakespeare, which seem to me to have been woven into scenes involving magic or associated with it. After all, the play was probably first performed in the presence of King James, who was both a scholar and an expert in demonology and things occult. As the later Masques of Ben Jonson reveal, with their heavily pedantic or arcane marginal glosses along the text of, say, *The Masque of Queens*, the body of the entertainment was built as a labyrinth of knowledge (Jonson's famous *Court hieroglyphics*). Although we have no text supervised by Shakespeare and no idea of what marginalia he may have used as verbal-visual prompters, it is undeniable that the unique importance devoted to magic (in its classical and continental overtones) in this play shows extensive documentation and a double work of conflation and compression. I take the cauldron scene, which functions as a sort of antimasque in the play, as quite emblematic in this respect. It concentrates the textual 'brew' and its *membra disjecta* of witch-lore and legend, repeats in a grotesque undertone the main magical motifs in the play, and their obsessional insistence with depraved maternity and perverted nourishment.

The presentation of magic in *Macbeth* is sustained by a great number of classical allusions and sources that build up a learned though largely submerged context for the many verbal, visual and poetic flashes in the play.

The first mythical allusion that occurs is to the archaic goddess of war Bellona, when Rosse addresses Macbeth as *Bellona's bridegroom* (I.2.55). This is the one and only allusion in Shakespeare to this early and obscure Roman goddess of war, which he probably found in Book I of Lucan's *The Civil War or Pharsalia*, where the author lists the unnatural prodigies and dire calamities that accompanied the beginning of the war between Caesar and Pompey:

> If tales are true, the national deities shed tears [ … ] Birds of ill-omen cast a gloom upon the daylight, and wild beasts, leaving the woods by night, made bold to place their lairs in the heart of Rome [ … ] Women gave birth to creatures monstrous in the size and number of their limbs, and mothers were appalled by the babes they bore; and boding prophecies spoken by the sybil of Cumae passed from mouth to mouth. Again the worshippers who gash their arms, inspired by fierce Bellona chanted of heaven's wrath, and the Galli whirled round their gory locks and shrieked disaster to the nation.

As in *Macbeth*, this passage evokes a trend of apocalyptic imagery, as chaos and doom are suggested in the unnatural events marking the animal and the human worlds alike. What is more the Latin phrase *crinem* [ … ] *sanguineum* which the Loe b library translator, J.D. Duff, has chosen to render by the expression 'gory locks', may well have suggested the apparition of *the blood-bolter 'd Banquo* (IV.1.123) if Shakespeare did use this passage as one of his sources for witchcraft in the play.
Bellona is also mentioned by Boccaccio in *The Genealogy of the Gods*, in connection with Minerva:

Minerva [ … ] was the daughter of the second Jove [ … ] [and], Cicero states, was the inventor and prince of wars, and yet is called by some Bellona, sister of Mars, driver of chariots, as it seems is shown by Statius saying: 'Bellona reins the horses with her bloody hand and avoids the long arrows'. Nor was this the one that the ancients affirmed to be virgin and sterile, indeed, as the same Cicero would have it, she gave birth to the first Apollo, from Vulcan oldest child of Heaven. Beside that [ … ] this is the one that was storied famous in arms, with dark eyes, holding in her hand a very long spear with a crystal shield, and this the more to show her rediscovery of war, rather than for anything else.

On a second level, as G.L. Kittredge remarks [in *Witchcraft in Old and New England*, 1929], Bellona was also equated by the Saxons with the Valkyries while the *Oxford Dictionary of Etymology* (ed. C.T. Onions) enters the word 'Valcyrie' as synonymous with "Bellona, Erinys, Gorgo, witch, sorceress". In Scandinavian mythology, the valkyrie was a war-maiden who hovered over battle-fields to conduct the fallen warriors to the Valhalla. George W. Dasent, in his book on *Popular Tales from the Norse* [1859] comments that these 'Wish-Maidens', or *oska-moer* as they are called in the *Edda*, were Odin's corse choosers, i.e. those who picked out the dead for him in the field of battle. Given the Norwegian background of these mid-eleventh century Scottish battles and their overall atmosphere of grand war epic, the Scandinavian connection at the beginning of the play should not be overlooked.

Shakespeare had already indirectly alluded to Bellona in connection with Hotspur in the first part of *Henry IV*, when the young Percy alludes to the fire-eyed maid of smoky war (IV.1.14) and again at the beginning of *Henry V* when the Chorus says of young King Henry:

Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
Assume the port of Mars, and at his heels,
Leashed in like hounds, should famine, sword
and fire
Crouch for employment (5-8).

This passage takes its source in Holinshed in a speech attributed to the *Warlike Harry* before the besieged city of Rouen, on 2 January 1419:

He declared that the goddesse of battel, called Bellona, had three handmaidens, ever of necessitie attending upon him, as blood, fire, and famine. And whereas it laie in his choise to use them all three, (yea, two or one, at his pleasure,) he had appointed onelie the meekest maid of those three damsels to punish them of that citie, till they were brought to reason.

It is interesting here that, just as in the case of the Gorgon (see below) and the Sisters in *Macbeth*, we have here another malefic female trinity.

The association between war and femininity conjures up the mythical image of the Amazon which seems to have fascinated the Elizabethans, partly because of its possible identification with the Virgin Queen of England who, in her speech to the British army at Tilbury in August 158, just before the Armada, had said: *known I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king of England too*. On August 8th, Leicester wrote in a letter that the *Queen was full of princely resolution and more than feminine courage [ … ] She passed like some Amazonian empress through all her army*. Some contemporary verse in Latin by Eleutherrius call Elizabeth *Angla virago* and compare her with the Amazon queen Penthesilea in an epic simile, and a Dutch engraving of 1598 has a figure which is both a map of Europe and a representation of Elizabeth brandishing her sword over the Armada. In the fifth book of *The Faerie Queene*,
the chivalrous Britomart appears as the fictional image of Elizabeth, although it is true that only Radigund, a possible characterization of Mary Stuart, is effectively called an Amazon by Spenser, since the Amazons were also commonly regarded as a symbol of female tyranny.

Now, the scene in *Macbeth* being essentially Scotland, the other possible context for Shakespeare's image may have been Holinshed's *Description of Scotland*, where the chronicler describes at length the martial courage of Scottish women:

> In these daies also the women of our countrie were of no lesse courage than the men; for all stout maidens and wives (if they were not with child) marched as well in the field as did the men, and so soone as the armie did set forward, they slue the first living creature that they found, in whose bloud they not onelie bathed their swords, but also tasted therof with their mouthes, with no lesse religion and assurance conceived that if they had alreadie been sure of some notable and fortunate victorie.

This gruesome fascination for the blood of battles may explain why the Amazon was often associated with witch-craft and cannibalism in the Renaissance. But, although the figures of the Valkyrie and of the Amazon form another malefic female trinity in conjunction with Bellona here (it is indeed one of the patterns of *Macbeth*, to resort to mythical figures that are all female and usually go by three), it is in fact *brave Macbeth* [ … ] *which smok'd with bloody execution* (I.2.18) of the first Act and he who will be shown wading deeper in blood as the play goes on. Lady Macbeth has not appeared yet and, in spite of her blood-curdling speeches to call forth the *murth'ring ministers* (I.5.48), Miss Bradbrook is probably right in saying [in "The Sources of Macbeth," *Shakespeare Survey* 4 (1951)] that "she is not quite Holinshed's valkyrie".

In fact, in the early scenes of the play, it is as if Lady Macbeth were essentially the daring mind that conjured up the spirits of murder to pour her *dire cruelty* into her husband's ear and make him the executioner of meek king Duncan. The evil imagery of her famous soliloquy in I.5 just after a Messenger has brought her the news of the king's visit to her castle, turns her into a verbal fury and a witch (11.40-54):

> [ … ] Come, you Spirits  
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
> And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full  
> Of direst cruelty …  
> [ … ] Come to my woman's breasts  
> And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers.

The desire to be 'unsexed' and the sacrifice of her femininity identity her with the prototype of the Amazon, since, as suggested by the fanciful etymology of the name, which was supposed to derive from 'a-mazos', i.e. breastless, amazons were believed to have the custom to destroy the girls' right breasts so as to prevent them getting in the way when shooting their arrows in battle.

The second mythical figure evoked, albeit indirectly, in the play is that of the Greek enchanteress Circe, who is metaphorically hinted at in the *wine and wassail* with which Lady Macbeth plans to drug Duncan's chamberlains:

*Lady M.* When Duncan is asleep  
[ … ] his two chamberlains  
Will I with wine and wassail so convince,  
That memory, the warder of the brain,
Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason
A limbeck only: when in swinish sleep
Their drenched natures lie, as in a death
(I.7.62-9)

Circe's influence is here a subliminal one which merely surfaces in the striking image of the *swinish sleep*. In the *Odyssey* Homer describes the powers of enchantment of the fair witch through Polites' narrative of how he and his men were turned into swine after being invited to enter the palace and to drink some delicate potion:

*Polites* ... said [ ... ] "O, friends,
Some one abides within here, that commends
The place to us and breathes a voice divine
As she some web wrought, or her spindle's
twine
She cherisht with her song; the pavement rings
With imitation of the tunes she sings;
Some woman, or some Goddess tis. Assay
To see with knocking". Thus said he, and they
Both knockt, and called; and straight her shining
gates
She opened, issuing, bade them in to cates.
Led, and unwise they follow'd, all but one,
Which was Eurylochus, who stood alone
Without the gates, suspicious of a sleight.
They enterd, she made sit; and her deceit
She cloakt with Thrones and goodly chaires of
State,
Set nearby honey and the delicate
Wine brought from Smyrna, to them, meale and
cheese;
But harmefull venoms she commixt with these,
That made their Countrey vanish from their
thought.
Which eate, she toucht them, with a rod that
wrought
Their transformation farre past humane wunts;
Swines' snouts, swines' bodies tooke they,
bristles, grunts,
But still retained the soules they had before
Which made them mourne their bodies' change
the more.
She shut them straight in sties, and gave them
meate,
Oke-mast and beech and Cornell fruite they eate,
Groveling like swine in earth, in foulest sort.

This long quotation was necessary to show that Shakespeare had indeed done some research on the Circe myth since *The Comedy of Errors* where the line *I think you all have drunk of Circe's cup* (V.1.271) was probably simply inspired by Whitney's emblem, as the phrase of *Circe's cup* occurs in the last line of the poem below the woodcut. Whitney shows several animals as the results of the transformations of Circe and he calls the swine *hogge*. Although Ovid naturally also refers to Circe and to her wiles and enchantments in the
fourteenth book of *Metamorphoses*, Homer’s description seems closer to Shakespeare’s play both in atmosphere and verbal patterns. So I would make it a case here for Shakespeare working on his tragedy with Homer’s text (probably in some private translation since Chapman’s was not printed before 1614) uppermost in his mind and argue for this passage from *The Odyssey* to be considered as a hidden model for Macbeth.

Indeed, we can see two important parallels with *Macbeth* in this passage. The first is found in the lines where Lady Macbeth later tells her husband that the surfeited grooms / Do mock their charge with snores: I have drugg’d their possets (H.2.5-6). A ‘posset’ was a type of mixed beverage very much like Circe’s potion: its traditional ingredients were ale or sack, spiced with sugar, eggs, and hot milk to form a curd. It is also interesting to note that the image was already used by the Ghost in *Hamlet* to describe the effects of Claudius’s poison on his blood:

The leperous distilment, whose effect  
Holds such an enmity with blood of man  
That swift as quicksilver it courses through  
The natural gates and alleys of the body,  
And with a sudden vigour it doth posset  
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,  
The thin and wholesome blood.

(I.5.63-70)

Similarly, the ‘wassail bowl’, customary of Christmas hospitality in Elizabethan England, was made with a crab dipped in ale and sugar. Incidentally, the word reinforces the strong impression of the Macbeths’ breach of sacred hospitality in those scenes. The reference to the *snores* of the guards is evocative of some loudy inebriated sleep as well as of the grunting of pigs.

The second parallel concerns the Porter scene which seems to pre-exist in Homer in miniature and as it were in ovo, in the repeated allusions to Circe’s gates and to knocking upon them for entrance. In the words of Duncan that precede his entry into Inverness (This castle hath a pleasant seat / Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself/ Unto our gentle senses., I.6.1-3), the Macbeths’ castle looks as deceptively inviting as Circe’s. This is another variation on the fair/foul motif running throughout the play. The Porter makes of course great fun out of the potentially frightening knocking at the gates by giving a comic echo to the actual knocking at the door and by repeating the word as a burden, thus turning the whole business into a grim 'knockabout' farce. But, significantly, the second half of his speech is a quizzical piece about the equivocating powers of drink, that both provokes and unprovokes, makes and mars desire and men.

Another possible link between Circe and wine may be established through a pun on ‘swinish’ and ‘winish’. Macbeth’s later metaphor (*The wine of life is drawn*, II.3.95) probably takes up the idea, suggesting that the more sinister side of the Porter’s equivocation has now come about. It is the sobered down, cold and tragic realization of irreversible horror, which is of course both symbolical and ironic in its christian undertones, but also a grim counterpart of the Circe episode in Homer which remains essentially comic because the situation is reversible. The sailors will indeed be changed back to their previous human shapes.

As to the swine, we can remark that they are often mentioned in witchcraft and magic (the second Witch says she has been killing swine in I.2.2) ever since, in the New Testament, Christ cast out the devils of the possessed at Gadarenes into the herd of swine that subsequently fell down a slope and drowned in the sea (Matthew VIII. 28-32, Mark V. 8-13 and Luke VIII. 26-33)....

Besides, an old Morality play called *The Cradle of Security*, whose text is now lost but which is briefly described in Robert Willis’s spiritual autobiography, *Mount Tabor* (1639), offers an astonishing dramatization of the episode, which Shakespeare may have seen or heard of. This text offers a good example of the use of
swine masks in scenes of temptation and sin in the repertory of the Tudor moralities. Robert Willis saw the performance in Gloucester as early as 1570, when he was only a little boy of six (he was, incidentally, born the same year as Shakespeare) standing in the front bench between his father's legs:

The play was called (the Cradle of security,) wherein was personated a King or some great Prince with his Courtiers of severall kinds, amongst which three ladies were in speciali grace with him; and they keeping him in delights and pleasures, drew from his graver Counsellors, hearing of Sermons, and listening to good Counsell, and admonitions, that in the ende they got him to lye downe in a cradle upon the stage, where these three Ladies joying in a sweet song rocked him asleepe, that he snorted againe, and in the meane time closely conveyed under the cloaths where withall he was covered, a vizard like a swines snout upon his face, with three wire chaines fastned thereunto, to the other end thereof being holden severally by those three ladies, who fall to singing againe, and then discovered his face, that the spectators might see how they had transformed him, going on with their singing; whilst all this was acting, there came forth of another door at the farthest end of the stage, two old men, the one in blew with a Serjeant at Armes, his mace on the shoulder, the other in red with a drawn sword in his hand [ … ] at last they came to the Cradle, when all the Court was in greatest jollity, and then the foremost old man with his Mace stroke a fearfull blow upon the Cradle; whereat all the Courtiers with the three Ladies and the vizard all vanished; and the desolate Prince starting up bare faced, and finding himselfe thus sent for judgement, made a lamentable complaint of his miserable case, and so was carried away by wicked spirits.

In this description, the play evokes an allegorical device, a sort of dumb-show not unlike that in Hamlet. But the enticing singing of the 'three ladies' and the 'swine snout' suggests a dramatic reworking of the Circe myth in a christian light, quite close to what Shakespeare is doing in Macbeth in terms of translating it into powerful visual imagery and verbal magic.

The next mythological figure that occurs in the play is that of Hecate, which is twice alluded to in the play, in somewhat contradictory terms, as both pale and black (Pale Hecate off' rings II.1.52 and Black Hecate's summons III.2.41). Until she appears as a character rebuking the witches in III.5 Hecate is constantly associated with the operations of black magic or sorcery in the Renaissance and she is mentioned by Shakespeare both in A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Tempest. According to the Oxford Classical Dictionary, she was a fairly mysterious figure even in antiquity:

[She was] an ancient chtonian goddess of obscure origin [ … ]. Generally she is associated with uncanny things and the ghost world. For this reason, she was worshipped at the cross-roads, which seem to be haunted the world over. Hence her statues [ … ] often have three faces or three bodies [ … ] Hecate is a formidable figure [ … ] a bogy which 'meets' and frightens the wayfarers. Hence it is remarkable that she is associated with sorcery and black magic, from at least the tragic Medea.

Pierre Grimal, in his Dictionnaire de la mythologie [1951], further notes that, in late traditions, Hecate was made into the mother of Circe who was herself Medea's aunt, which gives the impression of a tightly knit family of female evil-doers.

The same type of close family relations seem to characterize another mythical figure or monster evoked in Macbeth, namely that of 'Gorgo' or 'the Gorgon', just after Macduff has discovered the horrible sight of king Duncan's dead body:

Approach the chamber, and destroy your sight
With a new Gorgon.
The Gorgons were another malefic trinity of sisters whose names were Medusa, Stheno and Euryale. Their hair was intertwined with serpents, their hands were brass, their bodies covered with scales, their teeth like boars' tusks. They also sported golden wings that allowed them to fly. When gazed upon, they turned the onlooker to stone. Medusa, whose name means 'the Queen' and who was the only mortal of the three, had her head cut off by Perseus; the latter, who knew of the deadly stare of the Gorgons, had managed to trap her by making her stare at herself in the shield given to him by the goddess Minerva and polished like a mirror (in other versions it was a crystalline shield, which introduces an interesting parallel between Bellona's shield as described by Boccaccio (see above) and Minerva's)....

The Gorgon, mentioned by Macduff, thus stands more as a mythological emblem for the series of severed heads in the play (Macdonwald's, Duncan's, the blood-boltered Banquo, the apparition of the Armed Head, and Macbeth's own head presented by Macduff to Malcolm at the end), than as an appropriate image to describe the dead king, unless she is reduced to the rhetorical trope of hysteron proteron to figure hair-raising horror. Dante alludes to the Medusa in Canto IX of his Inferno, as an image of the stricken conscience.

On the other hand, the assimilation of the Gorgon to the male heads cut off in the course of the tragedy was also quite possible. Indeed, Roman art in Britain has some examples of male Medusae, like the one found in the Temple of Salis-Minerva at Bath. And an equivalent of the grinning, glaring, open-mouthed, tongue-pulling mask of this semi-male figure is also probably to be found in the foliate head of the frightening Green Man, a popular figure of Elizabethan and Jacobean pageantry, which one can still see carved in stone or wood in the pillars and pews of English cathedrals.

Such ambiguity or androgyny of the Medusa figure in Macbeth is also a token of the androgyny of the witches and of the king, in a play where the feeling of the uncanny and of horror is also provoked by the question of sexual uncertainty with its virile women and its childish or unmanly men (for René Girard the abolition of sexual differences, which makes men effeminate and women masculine, is also a sign of what he calls the "sacrificial crisis" [in La violence et le sacré, 1973]. In the play, the possible translation of Medusa into a Green Man or Wodewose is an interesting mythical and magical process which works as a transition from the gore of Gorgo to the green of Birnam wood.

This feeling of deep ambivalence aroused by the vision of the Gorgon at the heart of the tragedy ... is an effect of equivocation and magic that subtly insinuate themselves in the language of the play whose ambiguity Marvin Rosenberg in The Masks of Macbeth [1978] defines as "the chameleon masks that [ ... ] shelter counter-meaning behind words".

But besides this verbal and visual magic, coming from the play's classical and mythical sources, one must also pay attention to what I will tentatively call "magic in action" i.e. the effective gestures or modes of behaviour that strengthen the representation of magic in Macbeth and help the spectators visualize it on the stage. Cornelius Agrippa and the Renaissance Neo-Platonists used to oppose two types of magic, that of the sorcerer or goetist and that of the magus or theurgist. Such terms stood for the practice of the black arts in general, or necromancy, on the one hand, which required the help of the devil and of the powers of darkness and designated, on the other hand, the use of white magic which was used for anything from the learned art of conjuring spirits for some good cause to the powers of healing by prayer, with elements like water or with the help of various charms. But one should also be aware of the fact that, like Jean Bodin in The Republic, King James in his Daemonology drew no distinction among magicians and censured all magic as black, an attitude which Frances Yates [in The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age, 1979] describes as "reactionary" as compared with what she calls "the Neo-platonic enlightenment" of Giordano Bruno and John Dee.
If we still accept to use those traditional categories in *Macbeth*, goetic magic naturally appears as the province of the witches and of Lady Macbeth, while theurgic magic is associated with the miracles performed by the 'Good King' at the English Court.

As far as goetic magic is concerned, I would like to focus my analysis on Lady Macbeth's 'conjuring' of the 'Spirits' and on the cauldron scenes, in so far as their imagery reverberates throughout the play: *Come to my woman's breasts / And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers*. Lady Macbeth's offers her milk *for gall* to her spirits (I think that, besides Johnson's generally accepted interpretation of 'in exchange for gall', we can perhaps also take the phrase to mean 'as gall', which implies that Lady Macbeth offers to nurse the spirits from her breasts and to feed them on her milk as their sustaining poison). This would have reminded Elizabethan audiences of the image of the witch suckling her familiars.

Besides the wonderful scene of the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, which anyway concerns the activity of the wet nurse, Shakespeare in fact rarely mentions a mother giving suck in his plays except in the two characters of Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra (who both curiously appear as childless). The former says / have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me (I.7.54-5), while the latter is described as a mother nursing the Nile worm on her breast that will bite her breast into a final death ecstasy:

> [To an asp, which she applies to her breast]
>     With thy
>     Sharp teeth this knot intrinsicate
>     Of life at once untie […]
> [To Charmian] Peace, peace!
>     Dost thou not see my baby at my breast
>     That sucks the nurse asleep?
> (V.2.302-09).

Behind these two scenes of fanciful breast-feeding by women who are less mothers than witch-figures, one is probably meant to recognize allusions to the contemporary belief, which was a specific feature of English and Scottish witchcraft, that a witch would entertain a familiar, i.e. a demon, in the shape of an animal. These familiars, whether they be cats, dogs, toads, rats or serpents, would suck the witch's blood from some 'privy', or secret part of her body, thus leaving an insensitive spot in it. This was called the 'witch's mark' and it could be detected by the Inquisitor if, after being pierced through with a fine blade (the so-called 'pricking of the mark'), the woman had no significant reaction of pain. These familiars are described by George Gifford, minister in Maldon, in his *Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraftes* [1593], where a *Schoolemaister* called M.P. says to a character named Danieli:

> What say you to this: that the witches have their spirits, some hath one, some hath more, as two, three, four, or five, some in one likeness and some in another, as like cattes, weasils, toads, or mice, whom they nourish with milke or with a chicken, or by letting them suck now and then a drop of bload; whom they call when they be offended with anie, and send them to hurt them in their bodies; yea, to kill them, and to kill their cattell.

So, when Lady Macbeth says *take my milk for gall* she is metaphorically uttering a form of incantation or maleficium that turns her nourishing, maternal fluid into venom, so that she herself is changed into some deadly snake and into a figure of the classical Fury.

Now, it is interesting that at the end of *1 Henry VI* Shakespeare had already presented a similar scene (with a grotesque rather than tragic note, it is true) when Joan the Pucell, also presented as both an amazon and a
Now, ye familiar spirits that are cull'd
Out of the powerful regions under earth,
Help me this once, that France may get the field.
[They walk, and speak not.]
O, hold me not with silence over-long!
Where I was wont to feed you with my blood
I'll lop off a member and give it to you
In earnest of a furthest benefit,
So you condescend to help me now.
[They hang their heads.]
No hope to have redress? My body shall
Pay recompense if you will grant my suit.
[They shake their heads.]
Cannot my body nor blood-sacrifice
Entreat you to your wonted futherance?
Then take my soul; my body, soul and all,
Before that England give the French their foil.

They depart. A little later in the play, Joan appears in a dialogue with a shepherd, her real father, whom she refuses to acknowledge:

Shep. Deny me not, I prithee, gentle Joan.
Joan Peasant, avaunt! You have suborn'd this man
Of purpose to obscure my noble birth.
Shep. 'Tis true, I gave a noble to the priest
The morn that I was wedded to her mother.
Kneel down and take my blessing, good my girl.
Will thou not stoop? Now cursed be the time
Of thy nativity! I would the milk
Thy mother gave thee when thou suck'dst her breast
Had been a little ratsbane for thy sake
(V.4.20-9).

In a way, the shepherd's curse of his daughter, who wishes his wife had poisoned her with her milk, is tantamount to Lady Macbeth's 'invocation' that leads to the symbolic sacrifice of her 'baby'.

This occurs in scene 7 of Act I, no longer in a soliloquy but in a dialogue with her husband, when she wants him to be a man and do the deed:

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this (11.54-9).

In these lines, Lady Macbeth takes the aggressive stance of the unnatural mother who, after replacing the maternal function with that of the witch, now turns the tenderly feminine act of breast-feeding into the most dreadful act of butchery. The image of the crushed babe is of course an emblematic one in the play and it is looking ahead to the cauldron scene and to the savage slaughter of Macduff's wife and babes. But one can also take the image as the symbol of the perverted mother who poisons her child with her milk, which is even more powerful when it is set against the background of contemporary Scottish practice, depicted in Holinshed's Description of Scotland:

They [the Scottish mothers] thought them [ … ] not to be kindlie fostered, except they were so well nourished after their births with the milke of their brests [ … ] nay they feared least they should degenerat and grow out of kind, except they gave them sucke themselves, and eschewed strange milke …

An interesting exception to that is the case of James I himself, who, in his opening speech to his first English Parliament, on 19 March 1603/04, declared: 'thank God I sucked the milk of God's truth with the milk of my nurse. Although the milk is only a metonymy here, the phrase reveals an attitude which is complementary to that of Lady Macbeth in that it corresponds to the child's denying his own mother (Mary Stuart is indeed excluded from the 'Show of eight king' in the witches' cave). When the mother is degenerate enough to be bent on the destruction of her own children, which was the ritual initiation sacrifice in witchcraft, the only way to enable the child to survive was to allow him to suck Strange milke.

A classical and mythical analogue for this scene of breast-feeding turning into infant slaughter is that of Medea, one of the archetypal witches in antiquity, described both by Ovid in the sixth book of his Metamorphoses and by Seneca in a tragedy that Shakespeare must have read in Studley's translation. The scene in which Medea contemplates revenge on Jason by slaughtering her own children shows her shedding her own blood in sacrifice to Hecate, in order to prepare herself to the unnatural murder:

With naked breast and dugges layde out Ile
pricke with sacred blade [ … ]
Myne arme, that for the bubbling bloude and
issue may bee made [ … ]
My tender childrens crussed fleshe, and broken
broosed bones
Lerne how to brooke with hardned heart.

The translator is responsible for such words as 'dugges' or 'tender children' just as, in an earlier passage of the play describing Medea's plan for revenge (With crimsen colourde bloud of Babes their Aulters will I stayne), he had rendered victimas by 'babes'. This may have been for the sake of alliteration or an attempt of Studley to 'improve' on the already sensational text of Seneca's tragedy. But Lady Macbeth lacks Medea's excuse to kill, i.e. jealous frenzy and revenge; nor does she have, like another Amazonian trull, Margaret in 3 Henry VI, the motivation for murder coming from the desire to avenge York's defiant decision to take the throne from the king her husband (I.4.114). With her it is the other way round: she wants her husband to kill the king and take his crown out of pure ambition and fascination with evil.

One of the popular accusations against witches in the Renaissance was that they killed infants and young children to use their flesh and blood in their satanic brews. There is abundant textual as well as iconographic evidence for it as can be seen on various contemporary continental engravings….
This brings us back to the incantations of the Sisters preparing their *gruel thick and slab: Finger of birth-strangled babel Ditch-delivered by a drab* (IV.1.30-1). Such lines evoke the infanticidal imagery of Lady Macbeth's earlier speech and they represent an infernal re-enactment of the Biblical theme of the slaughter of the Innocents which recurs so often in this tragedy. The boiling cauldron of Act IV is a grotesque encapsulation of the chaos created by tyrannical rule where, in the place of a natural order of growth, we find foul animals and ripped bodily organs forming a gruesome little world picture.

But the evil cauldron is also the image of the unnatural mother's womb, and in some early productions it was indeed placed over a trap-door in order so that the witches and/or the later apparitions would be seen emerging out of it.

After the killing of infants, we are taken a step further into horror with the intimations of cannibalism in the play. Besides the explicit allusions to animal cannibalism (to Duncan's horses that *eat each other*, II.4.18, and to the *sow* [ … ] *that hath eaten/ Her nine farrow*, IV.1.64-5), we are told of the bits and pieces of the human body to be boiled in the Sisters' cauldron. A subliminal link between the dashed out brains of the breast-fed babe of Act I and the *finger of birth strangled babe* of Act IV is quite possible here. This suggests that the scenes of black magic had been prepared by the perversion of maternal love which is finally unmet aphored in the horrible climax where the mother eats the flesh of her own child. This is something which Shakespeare found in Seneca's *Tragedy of Thyestes* and which he dramatized in a most spectacular manner at the end of *Titus Andronicus*. Another possible source for this type of spectacular horror were the books of Deuteronomy (XXIX . 53-7) in the Old Testament, which list the curses and plagues threatened in retribution for disobedience to God:

> And thou shalt eate the fruit of thine owne body, the flesh of thy sonnes and of thy daughters [ … ]

> The tender and delicate woman among you which would not adventure to set the sole of her foot upon the ground, for delicateness and tendernesse, her eye shall be evil toward the husband of her bosome, and toward her sonne and toward her daughter.

> And towards her young one that commeth out from between her feet, and towards her children which she shall beare: for she shall eate them for want of all things, secretly in the siege and straitness.

This type of curse or plague was also taken up by the French Huguenot poet Agrippa d'Aubigné [in his "Misères", 1571] in his portrayal of France rent by the religious wars as the allegory of an afflicted Mother turning against the children whom she ought to protect and feed:

> O France desolee! O terre sanguinaire,
> Non pas terre mais cendre! ô mere, si c'est mere
> Que trahir ses enfans aux douceurs de son sein
> Et quant on les meurtir les serrer de sa main!
> [ … ]
> La mere ayant long-temps combattu dans son coeur
> Le feu de la pitié, de la faim la fureur,
> Et dict à son enfant (moins mere qu' affamee):
> "Rends miserable, rends le corps que je t' ay faict;
> Ton sang retournera où tu as pris le laict,
> Au sein qui t'allaictoit r'entre contre nature;
Ce sein qui t'a nourri sera ta sépulture”.

[O desolate France! O bloody land,
Not land, but ashes! O mother, if motherly it be
To betray your babes in your tender breast
As you hurt and choke them with your hands
[ … ]
[The hungry mother] craves in her breast for the loved one
And tells her child (less as a mother than as a famished one)
"Restore, thou wretch, the body which I made;
Your blood will return where you sucked your milk,
To the breast which nursed thee goes' gainst nature;
The breast that fed thee shall be thy sepulchre.”]

Although this long, dark and superb baroque epic poem was not translated into English, I find the analogies with the milk and blood images of Macbeth particularly striking.

Like Medea, Lady Macbeth symbolically murders her own children and children's limbs are thrown to boil into the cauldron out of which Macbeth will drink his hallucinating potion.

The antimasque-like grotesqueness of the cauldron scene, with its hodge-podge of cannibal sow and birth-strangled babe, is not entirely without precedent nor a pure invention on Shakespeare's part. It is interesting that, besides the classical sources (like the sixth book of Lucan's Pharsalia which presents a Thessalian witch or the incantations of Medea in both Ovid and Seneca), Shakespeare may have turned to contemporary travel books telling of "the Cannibals that each other eat". One of the available sources was André Thévet's account of the Brazilian cannibals in Les singularités de la France Antarctique, 1557, translated into English by Thomas Hacket in 1568 under the title of The New found worlde, or Antarctike. This narrative was used by Montaigne as a source for his famous essay 'Of the Cannibals', a text repeatedly echoed in Shakespeare's plays. Thévet was part of the Raleigh circle and his book already influenced the imagery of Marlowe's Tamburlaine. Moreover, the French edition of the book, it is interesting to note, figures as a gift in the Index Librorum Regis, which lists the books in King James VI's library. I will quote a passage where Thévet describes the cannibal practices of the Tupinamba Indians who lived in the bay of Rio de Janeiro:

Now when that they are retourned from their slaughter or murther, the owner of ther prisoner [ … ] will request all his friendes to come to him against that day to eate their parte of their booty, with good quantitie of Cahoun, which is a kinde of drinke made of Mill, with certaine roots. Upon this day of solemnitye, all the assistantes will decke themselves with fethers of divers coloures, or else they will painte their bodies. Specially he that doth the execution, shall be decked after the best maner that is possible, having his shread of wood, wherewith he doeth his office, richly adorned with faire fethers: but the prisoner, the shorter time that he hath to live, the more greater sign of ioy doeth he shewe. He shall be brought surely bounde with cordes of Cotton into a publicke place, being accompanied with ten or twelve thousande of the wilde men his enimies, and there shall be smitten downe like an Oxe in the shambles (after many Ceremonies.)
Besides the gruesome description of cannibal practices and of the custom of sticking the heads of the defeated enemies on poles as a triumphant posture which may be seen as providing a New World counterpart to some of the images and actions in Macbeth, it is also interesting to read about the Amazons in a subsequent chapter (XL), where Thévet remarks that: *One finds that there were three types of Amazons in History [...]* *The earliest were to be found in Africa, among whom were the Gorgons who had Medusa as a queen. With those examples one sees how Renaissance cosmographers revived ancient myths to give them a new contemporary habitation, always at the outer edges of the known world, as it had already been the case for the earlier Scythian cannibals and amazons in the descriptions of Herodotus. Amazons and cannibals were then obviously used to fill out the gaps in the maps.*

So, the scenes of black magic in Macbeth have appeared to stretch far beyond the simple chronicle material of Holinshed or others and they may be among the most thoroughly and diversely documented which Shakespeare ever wrote.

Now, the world of theurgic or white magic does not appear in the play until Act IV, scene 3, in the famous lines where the miracles performed by Edward the Confessor, the Good King of England, are described by Malcolm:

> A most miraculous work in this good King,  
> Which often, since my here-remain in England,  
> I have seen him do. How he solicits Heaven,  
> Himself best knows; but strangely-visited people,  
> All swoln and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye,  
> The mere despair of surgery, he cures;  
> Hanging a golden stamp about their necks,  
> Put on with holy prayers: and 'tis spoken,  
> To the succeeding royalty he leaves  
> The healing benediction.

This King who heals by touch a disease called 'the Evil' is the obvious antithesis of the Scottish tyrant whose sole name blisters on our tongues (IV.3.12) and who has infected his country with some foul disease. Those magic powers of the king are not simply meaningful in the context of the imagery and symbolism of evil in the play. They have long been considered in history as the attributes of the royal person and as a sign of the king's legitimacy and of his divine right. Marc Bloch wrote a rather voluminous book on the topic, *Les rois thaumaturges* [1924], where he considers at some length the case of Edward the Confessor, the last of the Anglo-Saxon kings in England:

> Edouard le Confesseur fut de bonne heure tenu pour un saint [...]. On lui prête bon nombre de guérisons miraculeuses: étant saint, il devait être thaumaturge [...]. Il y avait en Angleterre une jeune femme atteinte d'un mal affreux: une enflure des glandes du cou qui répandait une odeur fétide. Instruite par un songe, elle alla demander sa guérison au roi. Celui-ci, s'étant fait apporter un vase plein d'eau, y trempa les doigts et touche ensuite les parties malades, faisant sur elles plusieurs signes de croix. Aussitôt sous la pression de la main royale, le sang et le pus sortirent: la maladie parut céder [...]. Une semaine à peine
s'était écoulée que l'heureuse femme était radicalement guérie, que dis-je? non seulement débarrassée de son mal, mais d'une stérilité obstinée qui la désolait: la même année elle donna un enfant à son mari.

[Edward the Confessor was reputed a saint from very early on …]. He has been accredited with many miraculous cures: being a saint he had to be a healer … . There was in England a young woman suffering from a horrible disease: the glands in her neck were swollen and gave off a fetid stench. Being instructed by a dream, she went to ask the king to cure her. He had a vessel of water brought to him, dipped his fingers in it and touched the sick parts of her body, making several signs of the cross over them. Under the pressure of the royal hand the blood and pus came out at once … . Hardly had a week gone by that the happy woman was completely cured, nay not only rid of her evil but also of an obdurate sterility which afflicted her: in the same year she bore a child to her husband.]

It is interesting to note that in the legend of the saintly king, the cure of the Evil is accompanied by a restoration of fertility as in the general movement of Macbeth. As in Richard II, the good king is indirectly described as the Lord's anointed (III.2.54-7).

In fact, Edward the Confessor seems to be the reincarnation of another saintly king, Duncan himself, as there certainly exists some correlation between Duncan's emblematic golden blood (II.3.112) and the 'golden stamp' which Edward hangs around the neck of the sick he wants to heal. Macbeth is a play that seems to argue in favour of the divine absolutism of kings which, of course, was not to displease James I. The latter, although quite reluctant to touch for the evil at the beginning of his reign (he had even made it a condition for his acceptance of the English crown that he would not be required to touch), was finally gradually coaxed into keeping up the tradition which Henry VIII and Elizabeth I had observed before him. In fact, such a vision of kingship remained by and large a magical one, quite suited to the description which Sir James Frazer gives of its ritual and primitive origins in The Golden Bough [1922]:

The belief that kings possess magical or supernatural powers by virtue of which they can fertilise the earth and confer other benefits on their subjects would seem to have been shared by the ancestors of the Aryan races from India to Ireland … . Perhaps the last relic of such superstitions which lingered about our English kings was the notion that they could heal scrofula by their touch. The disease was accordingly known as the King's Evil … . Hence the king, starting as a magician, tends gradually to exchange the practice of magic for the priestly functions of prayer and sacrifice.

But the 'good King' of Act IV is not simply the antithesis or antidote of the tyrant Macbeth. His healing of 'the Evil' is also a form of exorcism of the particular type of evil generated by the Sisters and by Lady Macbeth in her dark incantations.

The name of 'king's Evil' was then often given to the disease known as scrofula, i.e. the tubercular inflammation of the glands of the neck. According to An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language, "the literal signification of scrofula is a little pig; diminutive of scrofa, a breeding sow. It is remarkable that the Greek name … for swollen or scrofulous glands appears to be similarly connected with [the Greek word for] pig". William Clowes, an Elizabethan physician, published in 1602 a book called A right frutefull treatise of the artificiali cure of struma where, as he says in the preface, he means:

... to demonstrate and deliver unto the friendly Reader, the cure of a certain unnaturall tumor or Absceese, called in Latin, Struma; of the Arabians Steophala, but generally, in English, it is called the kings or Queenes Evill: A disease repugnant to nature: which grievous malady is knowne to be miraculously cured and healed, by the sacred hands of the Queenes most Royall
Maiesty, even by Divine inspiration and wonderfull worke and power of god, above mans skill, Arte and expectation.

Clowes goes on to say that

Scrofula taketh the name of Scropha, which signifieth a Sow, that is a Gluttonous and Phlegmaticke beaste: and it growth in them by reason of their overmuch eating. There be some againe which say, that it is called Scrophula, either because that Sowes which give sucke be subject to this disease, and that is the reason of their greedy eating; or else because the sow that giveth Milke brings forth many young ones at once.

The coincidence between Lady Macbeth's Circean powers to plunge men into a swinish sleep and the witches' use of sow's blood in their cauldron, on the one hand, and Edward the Confessor's powers to heal by touch the sow's disease or king's evil, on the other, suggests that Shakespeare did go into what medical information was available about scrofula while he was writing Macbeth.

[In Religion and the Decline of Magic, 1971] Keith Thomas's remark that "scrofula itself was probably caused by infected milk" shows that, in those days, analogies were then drawn between the mother feeding her child and the sow's giving milk to explain the transmission of the disease and its presence in young infants. We have already seen above the weaning of the child to avoid it sucking 'corrupt milk' and, in the same connection, Robert Burton, in The Anatomy of Melancholy, warns that if the mother be not fit or well able to be a nurse [ … ] that they should make choice of such woman, of a good complexion, honest, free from bodily diseases, if it possible, all passions and perturbations of the mind. What Burton actually means by his rather vague last phrase is clearly explained in Lawrence Stone's Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800 [1977], where we learn that

according to Galen, who was followed by XVIth and XVIIth century doctors, husbands ought not to sleep with nursing wives since carnal copulation [ … ] troubleth the blood, and also, by consequence, the milk. [This was the reason why] kings and noblemen took the wet-nurse into their own house, so that sexual access to her by the husband could be effectually prevented.

This piece of information on early seventeenth century child-rearing practices would also be quite relevant to Lady Macbeth who, as some critics and directors have noted, works herself up into a criminal fury which is close to sexual excitement in the speeches where she calls on Spirits and murthering ministers. The metaphorical 'witch' in her (she uses the language of the sorceress) is equivocatingly doubled with the wiling seduction of a woman burning with voluptuousness and sensuality.

This brings us back to the point of Lady Macbeth's perverted maternity as the main source of her black magic and of the contamination of evil in the play. We have seen what types of associations the images of the milk changed for gall and of the dashing of the brains of the baby sucking at her breast evoked in contemporary imagination and superstition. Clowes's text allows us to go even a step further in the analysis of these clusters of meaning to suggest that there may be a link between the images of the sow and those associated with the murderess. To paraphrase such a parallel we would have to say that, like the sow, Lady Macbeth symbolically destroys her own young by poisoning them at her galled breast and by allowing them to suck what will infect them with scrofula. It is probably in this context that the images of animal cannibalism in Macbeth should be placed (particularly that of the sow [ … ] that hath eaten Her nine farrow). In this she would come close to the witch Sycorax in The Tempest, a name whose etymology combines the sow and the raven and that also sounds quite close to the name Circe, in Shakespeare's late and rather grotesque recreation of the evil dam motif.
So, Lady Macbeth, as the archetype of the bad mother, provides infected nourishment to the people, the body politic, who then have to be touched and cured by a saintly king. It is of course true that the healing king is Edward the Confessor and that the sick are hence the English rather than the Scottish subjects. Marvin Rosenberg mentions the difficulty in *The Masks of Macbeth*, and speaks of "the complex dialectic of the play" and of Shakespeare "dimension[ing] fair with foul even here". What matters in terms of structure, symbolic design and dramatic movement is the contrast between Scotland's 'butcher' and England's 'saintly king'. Edward embodies the charismatic figure of grace in a play that, unlike the histories, curiously has no bishop, cardinal or even priestly figure that would call for the purgation of evil and the reparation finally achieved in Macduff's victory and the accession of Malcolm. So, for the sake of dramatic balance Shakespeare manages a transference or transmutation of evil across Scotland's borders into England's bodies. This double focus or piece of dramatic 'handy-dandy' sacrifices the demands of surface rationality for the sake of the inner dynamics of imagery and structure. In terms of rhetoric there is a minor hypallage or exchange between the Scots and the English, to make the overall antithesis more striking and convincing.

This type of symbolism works in connection with the political movement of the play as well as with its dramatic structure. It is also congruent with the ritual element of civic pageantry where the fountain motif was a prominent and popular emblematic device. Lady Macbeth changes the fair and fertile fountain of wine and milk (the emblem of the prosperous and orderly commonwealth) into a foul cistern of blood and gall which will spread contagion, sterility and death all around during the tyrannical reign of her husband. Then Scotland ceases to be a mother to become a grave (IV.3.166).

Moreover, the king reigns over his thanes like a gardener over his orchard: his good rule promotes fertility and growth and, conversely, his negligence or wastefulness (as in the case of Richard II for instance) make it swarm with caterpillars or noisome weeds (*Richard II*, III.4.38, 47). Contrary to Duncan and to Malcolm who, in the end, refer to things which would be planted newly with the time (V.9.31), Macbeth can only plant murderers (*I will advise you where to plant yourselves, / Acquaint you with the perfect spy o'th' time* (III.1.128-129). When the latter mentions the gift of "bounteous Nature" (*III. 1.97*), he is addressing the gang of criminals whom he sends out after Banquo and Fleance and whom he otherwise places in the lowest ranks of mankind.

After his unnatural accession to the throne of Scotland, Macbeth quickly becomes a bloody tyrant and a butcher making the whole country suffer physically as if it had been struck by some kind of plague. The main metaphor all along the tragedy is that of the sickly weal requiring 'medicine' rather than that of the waste land as in *Richard II* or *The Winter's Tale*, although Lennox, one of the Scottish noblemen, says at the end or as much as it [our country] needs / The dew the sovereign flower, and drown the weeds (*V.2.30*). What's more, as is signified by the miniature chaos of the witches' cauldron, the Macbeths are both afflicted by the curse of sterility as opposed to Banquo who is said to be *the root and father / Of many kings* (*III. 1.5-6*). This motif runs parallel to the plant/growth images discussed above as the word 'root' certainly points to the concept of some genealogical tree (exclusive of women and in the order of male filiation only, from father to son, as repeated several times in the play). Now, this type of seasonal or vegetal imagery had a ritual significance for Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences because it was associated with the ceremonies of civic pageantry organized for the king's accession or entry into London.

Pageantry frequently resorted to the garden allegory to symbolize either dynastic unification (the white and the red roses in the case of the Tudors) or happy succession from the Tudor to the Stuart branches. It is thus no wonder that such devices should also be found in the popular drama of the time as associated with some of the play's prevalent images. Besides the garden allegory, another emblem of restored fertility and harmony used in street pageantry was the filling of the city's conduits or fountains with wine, as in Dekker's 1604 civic pageant:
Here on an arch Detraction and Oblivion seek by 'their malicious intention' to suck the fountain dry, but they are checked by the arrival of James I. Vice having been suppressed, the fount then flows with milk, wine, and 'balme' through its several pipes.

The mention of milk and wine are respectively changed for gall and mere lees in Lady Macbeth’s invocation of the Spirits and in the stopping of Duncan’s wine of life after his murder. As to balme, one may naturally think of the perfumes of Arabia that will not sweeten the little hand of Lady Macbeth in her sleepwalking scene (V. 1. 48).

In Macbeth, the desire for fertility and the repugnance for drought is rendered in the most graphic and spectacular of terms in the almost Manichean antithesis between the solitary tyrant pent up in his flint tower of Dunsinane besieged by Malcolm, Macduff and Siward, and the green wood of the liberating armies which is reminiscent of the folk-custom of the May-Day gathering of greenery, when Elizabethan villages traditionally ransacked the neighbouring forests for boughs to deck the Maypole planted in the centre of the green by the church. German critics have found an interesting analogue for this in Germanic folklore, in the story of King Grünewald:

A King had an only daughter, who possessed wondrous gifts. Now, once upon a time there came his enemy, a King named Grünewald, and besieged him in his castle; and, the siege lasted long, the daughter kept continually encouraging her father in the castle. This lasted till May-day. Then all of a sudden the daughter saw the hostile army approach with green boughs: then fear and anguish fell on her, for she knew that all was lost, and said to her father, “Father, you must yield, or die, I see the green-wood drawing nigh”.

In this tale the daughter plays the same part as the witches in Macbeth as she knows through her miraculous gifts that her father cannot be vanquished until the green wood comes to the castle. The Manual of German Mythology explains that the legend of the moving forest found its origin in the German popular ritual of May festivals and that King Grünewald (the name means 'green wood' in German) was some kind of Winter-giant whose reign came to an end when the Maying began and the green wood approached the village.

So, the development of the motifs and imagery of magic in Macbeth led Shakespeare to take a closer look at the sources of classical mythology and to go beyond the usual Ovidian and Senecan stories which he had used in an early comedy like A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Incidentally, it is no simple chance that these two plays should have masque-like and operatic structures that will indeed be worked upon by later playwrights or composers and blown up as it were from the many mythical allusions of the type which I have tried to analyze. I do not think that much can be made out of them in today’s theatre, in a world where classical myth seems to have gone back into the underground. But this was probably also the case in the popular stages of Shakespeare’s own time as opposed to what could be done and presented in the private theatres and in Court performances.

But in a tragedy like Macbeth Shakespeare does not indulge in the usual hocus-pocus or ‘abracadabra’ stuff that many of his contemporaries were content to use when they were dealing with scenes of magic. He is careful to relate them with the most intimate and domestic elements of life, through the milk and nursing images, interweaving the sources of fertility with the agents of destruction so that one is enabled to realize how deep-seated and difficult to eradicate evil is.

These images also function as a miniature emblem pointing to the theme of desecrated hospitality. The poisoning of the milk, the drugging of the wine, the consumption of strange flesh and strange blood show that black magic has contaminated the most basic functions of human existence and of the social community. Only some powerful exorcism, some miraculous intervention or divine help such as those provided in the Doctor interlude and in the reports of Edward the Confessor’s healing of the sick, could be seen as potent enough to
rid the world of the tyrant's plague.

The imagery bearing on black magic is tangled in a complex network of associations although it is also somehow organically as well as historically put together thanks to the classical and contemporary traditions of witchcraft and it stands poles apart from the scenes involving white and 'green' magic in the most blatant, dazzling type of antithesis. Yet black and beneficent magic are also linked by a relation of osmosis and complementarity in Norman Rabkin's definition of the term [in Shakespeare and the Common Understanding, 1967]. When the sweet milk of human concord has been poured into hell, it takes a divine patriarchal figure to cleanse and purify it.

Peter Stallybrass (essay date 1982)


In the following essay, Stallybrass analyzes the social and political relevance of witches during Shakespeare's time and examines Shakespeare's use of the witches to affirm the "natural" monarchical and patriarchal order.

For students of Macbeth, witchcraft has always presented a problem. At the one extreme, we have scholars like T.A. Spalding and W.C. Curry who have unearthed some of the historical minutiae of medieval and Renaissance concepts of witchcraft [in Elizabethan Demonology (1880) and Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns (1937), respectively]; at the other extreme, we have critics who accept the play's witchcraft only as a form of psychological symbolism. Since the publications of Keith Thomas's Religion and the Decline of Magic (1971) and Alan Macfarlane's Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England (1970), the latter position has seemed less tenable. But this does not mean that we should return to the (admittedly useful) positivistic data-gathering of Spalding and Curry to understand the function of witchcraft in Macbeth. I see little point, for instance, in attempting to classify the Weird Sisters as witches or warlocks or norms (distinctions which were rarely observed by Tudor and Stuart witchcraft treatises or reports of trials). Such classifications tend to emphasize the exoticism of witchcraft beliefs without beginning to explain how such beliefs could ever have been held.

It is, indeed, worth emphasizing the 'normality' of witchcraft beliefs. Although witchcraft accusations reached epidemic proportions in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, witchcraft beliefs are endemic in many societies. Their frequency, however, should not be taken as evidence for the truth of witchcraft (there is no proof, for instance, that 'witches' eat their own children, cause sickness, plague or famine, or have sexual relations with devils) but as evidence of the social utility of such beliefs in a variety of societies. An adequate explanation of witchcraft, then, needs to have a double focus: on the one hand, it must describe the actual beliefs and explain how they fit within a particular cosmology; on the other hand, it must take into account the function of such beliefs.\ldots

Witchcraft beliefs are one way of asserting distinctions; they 'sharpen definitions,' as Mary Douglas puts it [in the introduction to Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations (1970)], including definitions of political and familial roles. They can be used, for instance, to account for the "unnatural" ambition of a rival or for the 'unnatural' power of a woman. In doing so, such beliefs imply and legitimate their opposite, the 'natural'. In short, witchcraft beliefs are less a reflection of a real 'evil' than a social construction from which we learn more about the accuser than the accused, more about the social institutions which tolerate/encourage/act on those accusations than about the activities of those people (in England, mainly women, mainly poor) who were prosecuted as witches. What Mary Douglas says of dirt [in Purity and Danger (1978)] could be said of witchcraft: it 'is never a unique, isolated event' but rather 'the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification … in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.' Witchcraft accusations are a
way of reaffirming a particular order against outsiders, or of attacking an internal rival, or of attacking 'deviance'. Witchcraft in *Macbeth*, I will maintain, is not simply a reflection of a pre-given order of things: rather, it is a particular working upon, and legitimation of, the hegemony of patriarchy.

**WITCHCRAFT AND MONARCHY**

[According to G. L. Kittredge's *Witchcraft in Old and New England*, 1929] the English government had, at least since 1300, been concerned with 'witches'—with sorcerers, because they might attempt to kill the king, with prophets (including astrologers) because they might forecast the hour of his death.' The Duke of Buckingham, accused of treason in 1521, had been encouraged by a prophecy that he would be king, although he had been warned that the prophet, a Carthusian monk, 'might be deceived by the devil'. In 1558, Sir Anthony Fortescue was arrested for sorcery, having cast a horoscope which stated that the Queen 'should not live passing the next spring', and in 1580, Nicholas Johnson was accused of 'making her Majesty's picture in wax'. This last case was one of the factors in the passing of a new Act in 1580-1 which attacked the 'divers persons wickedly disposed' who had 'not only wished her Majesty's death, but also by divers means practised and sought to know how long her Highness should live, and who should reign after her decease, and what changes and alterations should thereby happen.' The Act went on to attack all those who, 'by any prophecying, witchcraft, conjurations or other like unlawfull means whatsoever', attempted to harm the monarch or to meddle in her affairs. In England, then, there was already a clear connection between prophecy, witchcraft, and monarchy before James ascended the throne.

In Scotland, James was making his own connections. There is little evidence that he had an interest in witchcraft before 1590, but the sensational trials of that year changed his attitude. More than 300 witches were alleged to have met and confessions were extorted, with the aid of torture, which pointed to a conspiracy directed by the Earl of Bothwell against the king himself. James took an active part in the trial, and Agnes Samson's report [in *Newes from Scotland*] of 'the very words which passed between the King's Majesty and his Queen at Oslo in Norway the first night of their marriage' made him give 'more credit to the rest'.

But if the trial triggered James's interest in witchcraft, we may suggest two possible determinants of the actual form his interest took. The first is, paradoxical though it may seem, his very desire to be in the intellectual vanguard. We need to remember that the witch craze was not the last fling of residual medieval 'superstition', but, at least in part, the potent construction of some of the foremost intellectuals of the time, including Bodin. It may well be … that it was James's attempt to keep up with intellectual developments on the Continent after his contract with scholars in Denmark in 1589 which first aroused his in terest in witchcraft.

But if his interest was stimulated by Continental ideas, his new belief consolidated his pre-existing interest in the theory and practice of godly rule. If the King was God's representative on earth, then who could be a more likely victim of the devil's arts than he? In his early work on the Book of Revelations, James had associated the devil with Antichrist, in his guise of the Pope, but it was not difficult to imagine that the devil employed more than one agency. To suggest, then, that the monarchy was under demonic attack was to glorify the institution of monarchy, since that implied that it was one of the bastions protecting this world from the triumph of Satan. As Stuart Clark says, [in *The Damned Art* (1977)], 'demonism was, logically speaking, one of the presuppositions of the metaphysics of order on which James's political ideas ultimately rested.' Clark also shows how this kind of antithetical thinking is the logical corollary of analogical thinking. If kingship is legitimated by analogy to God's rule over the earth, and the father's rule over the family and the head's rule over the body, witchcraft establishes the opposite analogies, whereby the Devil attempts to rule over the earth, and the woman over the family, and the body over the head.

Henry Paul, in his important study of Macbeth [*The Royal Play of Macbeth* (1950)], argues in great detail for the indebtedness of the play to James's views on the nature of witchcraft and kingship. The play was performed before James and his father-in-law, the King of Denmark, at Hampton Court in 1606, and Paul
argues that the play was shaped in important ways by royal patronage. But it is not demonstrable, in my view, that James's views (as set forth in his Daemonologie, for instance) were sources for the play, although they undoubtedly set ideological limits to it. In 1604, a play called Gowrie, performed by the King's Men, had been banned. The play was presumably based on the Earl of Gowrie's attempt to murder James in 1600. Gowrie had been killed in the attempt, and [according to Gowrie's Conspiracie (1600)] on him had been found a bag 'full of magickal characters, and words of enchantment, wherein, it seemed that he had put his confidence.' Whatever the reason for banning the play, the King's Men would have been unlikely to risk a second offensive play on the sensitive topics of the attack upon kings and the uses of the black arts.

But if James's ideas were not a source, they provide an analogue, sharing and partially determining the ideological terrain of Macbeth. Like James's works, Macbeth is constructed around the fear of a world without sovereignty. Similarly, Robert Bolton, preaching in 1621, attempted to legitimate sovereignty by constructing the imaginary horrors of a world without it:

Take Sovereignty from the face of the earth, and you turne it into a Cockpit. Men would become cut-throats and cannibals one unto another. Murder, adulteries, incests, rapes, robberies, perjuries, witchcrafts, blasphemies, all kinds of villainies, outrages, and savage cruelty, would overflow all Countries. We should have a very hell upon earth, and the face of it covered with blood, as it was once with water.

MACBETH AND HOLINSHED

If it was the ascension of James to the English throne which suggested a play about Scottish history, and about James's own ancestry in particular, it is worth noting how Shakespeare utilized Holinshed, his main source for the play. To begin with, he simplified the outlines of the story to create a structure of clear antitheses. Holinshed's Duncan is a weak king, 'negligent … in punishing offenders,' and unable to control the kingdom, whereas Shakespeare's Duncan is, as even Macbeth admits, 'clear in his great office' (I.vii.18). Holinshed's Macbeth has a legal right to the throne, since 'by the old lawes of the realme, the ordnance was, that if he that should succeed were not of able age to take the charge upon himselfe, he that was next of bloud unto him should be admitted', whereas Shakespeare makes little of Macbeth's claim. Moreover, Shakespeare omits any reference to the 'ten yeares in equall justice' during which Holinshed's Macbeth ruled after 'the feeble and slouthfull administration of Duncane'. Finally, Holinshed's Banquo is a party to Macbeth's plot to murder Duncan, whereas Shakespeare's Banquo is not.

What is striking about all these changes is that they transform dialectic into antithesis. Whereas Shakespeare's second historical tetralogy undoubtedly raises dialectical questions about sovereignty, Macbeth takes material eminently suitable for dialectical development (the weak ruler being overthrown by a ruler who establishes 'equall justice') and shapes it into a structural antithesis. One reason for the shaping of the sources in this way was, no doubt, royal patronage. This meant, for instance, that Banquo, James's ancestor, had to be shown in a favourable light, and it may be that James's views on godly rule and on 'the trew difference betwixt a lawfull, good King and an usurping Tyrant' were taken into account. Certainly, Macbeth differentiates as clearly as James's Basilikon Doron between the good king whose 'greatest suretie' is his people's good will and the tyrant who builds 'his suretie upon his peoples miserie'.

Holinshed's account, though, suggested another factor by which the tyrant might be distinguished from the godly ruler: his relation to witchcraft. For Holinshed describes how Macbeth 'had learned of certaine wizzards' and had gained (false) confidence from a witch who told him 'that he should never be slaine with man born of anie woman'. But even over the issue of witchcraft, Holinshed is not entirely clear, because the crucial prophecies which embolden his Macbeth are made by 'three women in strange and wild appareil, resembling creatures of elder world', and these women are later described as 'either the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their
necromentical science'. It was probably these three women whom Dr Gwin transformed into the *Tres Sibyllae* who hailed James as King of Scotland and England in a performance presented to the king at Oxford on 27 August 1605.

But for the Witches in *Macbeth* to have been presented as godly sibyls would have weakened the antithetical structure of the play. Only by making his Sisters forces of darkness could Shakespeare suggest demonic opposition to godly rule. And here Shakespeare had to supplement Holinshed's account of Macbeth. For although the political effects of usurpation are suggested by Holinshed's account of how, after Macbeth murdered Banquo, 'everie man began to doubt his owne life', there is little sense of the natural holocaust which Bolton saw as the logical outcome of the overthrow of sovereignty. For an image of a king's murder and the consequent turning of a country into 'a very hell upon earth', Shakespeare had to turn back to Holinshed's account of Donwald's murder of King Duff, a murder which is itself the consequence of the King's execution of Donwald's kinsmen for conspiring with witches against him. Many of the horrifying events which follow Duff's death (the darkening of the sun, lightning and tempests, cannibalism amongst animals) reappear, more or less transformed, in *Macbeth*, reaffirming through antithesis the order which has been overthrown—the order of monarchy, of patriarchy, of the head, of 'reason'.

**THE WITCHES**

'For Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft' (I Samuel XV. 23). And the first two scenes of *Macbeth* present both witches and rebellion. But what kind of witches are they? In the first scene, we can note several aspects of them: they are connected with disorder in nature (not only thunder and lightning but also 'fog and filthy air'); they are associated with familiars (Graymalkin and Paddock), the common companions of English witches but rarely mentioned in Scottish or Continental prosecutions; they can 'hover'; they reverse moral values ('Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (I.i.10); they presumably foresee the future, since the third witch knows that the battle will be over by sun set. The third scene, though, shows more clearly what seems to be an ambiguity in the presentation of the Witches. On the one hand, they have features typical of the English village 'witch', being old women, 'wither'd' and with 'choppy fingers' and 'skinny lips'. ([*In the Discoverie of Witchcraft*] Reginald Scot described English 'witches' as 'commonly old, lame, bleareied, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles'.) Moreover, the second witch kills swine and the first witch pursues a petty vendetta, typical offences in English witch prosecutions. But, on the other hand, they are mysterious and 'look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth' (I.iii.41), and they prophesy the future.

What is the function of this ambiguity? At one level, no doubt, it enabled Shakespeare to draw upon the common belief in an 'evil' at work in the English countryside whilst never reducing the play's witches to village widows. But it was also structurally convenient because it established a double perspective on evil, allowing for the simultaneous sense of reduction in Macbeth as he becomes increasingly dependent on the 'midnight hags' (IV.i.47) and of his aspiration as, after 'Disdaining Fortune' (I.ii.17) in the battle, he attempts to grab hold of Providence itself. The double perspective operates throughout the play. On the one hand, Macbeth is reduced to the image of 'a dwarfish thief (V.ii.22) before being literally reduced to the head which Macduff carries onto the stage. At this level, evil is conceptualized as eating up itself until nothing is left. But the conceptualization leaves no role for militant 'good' (and therefore would not require the 'great revenge' (IV.iii.214) of Malcolm and Macduff), and so the world of self-consuming evil is combined with a dualistic world in which both the Witches and Macbeth threaten to bring the world back to its first chaos or, as Bolton puts it, to create 'a very hell upon earth', the hell of a world without sovereignty.

**LADY MACBETH, THE WITCHES, AND FAMILY STRUCTURE**

The Witches open the play, but they appear in only the first and third scenes of the first Act. In the fifth and seventh scenes, the 'temptress' is Lady Macbeth. In other words, scenes in which female figures champion evil alternate with public scenes (Duncan and news of the battle in scene 2; the honouring of Macbeth, Banquo,
and Malcolm in scene 4; Duncan's reception at Macbeth's castle in scene 6). And the public scenes, with the exception of the last, are exclusively male. If this foregrounds the female figures, Lady Macbeth is also equated with the Witches in more specific ways. As Mark Rose says [in Shakespearean Design (1972)], 'the third scene opens with the Witches alone, after which Macbeth enters and they hail him by his various titles. The fifth scene opens with Lady Macbeth alone, practising witchcraft.… And when Macbeth enters she, too, hails him by his titles.' Moreover, Lady Macbeth and the Witches are equated by their equivocal relation to an implied norm of femininity. Of the Witches, Banquo says:

You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.

(I.iii.45-7)

And Lady Macbeth invokes the 'murd'ring ministers' (I.v.45) to unsex her.

The enticement of Macbeth both by the Witches and by his wife is briefly suggested in Holinshed's account of Macbeth, and in Holinshed's earlier account of Donwald's wife Shakespeare found a much expanded role given to a murderer's wife. But in neither account is any connection made between witchcraft and the murderer's wife. Again, we see the antithetical mode being strengthened in Macbeth by the development of analogies between 'perverted femininity,' witchcraft, and a world turned upside down. The analogy was not, of course, new, and it is notoriously enshrined in Malleus Maleficarum where Femina is derived from Fe and Minus 'since [woman] is ever weaker to hold and preserve the faith.'

But it is important to note the shift of emphasis when Lady Macbeth 'replaces' the witches. By this movement from the already damned to the secular world, the implications of the rejection of 'womanhood' are made explicit. Whereas the witches are difficult to categorize at all within the implied norm, in I v, Lady Macbeth is shown in the very attempt of overthrowing a norm inscribed in her own body. 'Remorse', 'compunctious visitings of Nature', and the 'milk' of 'woman's breasts' (I.v.41-5) are established as the 'feminine' virtues even as Lady Macbeth negates them. Indeed, because of the inscription of those virtues in Lady Macbeth, her relation to witchcraft is not as clear at the psychological as it is at the structural level. Although Lady Macbeth might say, like Joan la Pucelle, 'I exceed my sex' (1 Henry VI, I.ii.90), her relation to witchcraft is never as explicit as Joan's. For Joan is not merely accused of being a 'witch' and 'damned sorceress' (III.ii.38); her conjurings lead to the actual appearance of fiends upon the stage.

Nevertheless, Lady Macbeth's invocation of the 'murd'ring ministers' (I.v.45) as her children has particular resonance within the context of witchcraft, even if her ministers never appear. For her proclaimed role as mother/lover of the spirits implicitly subverts patriarchal authority in a manner typically connected with witchcraft. If the first Witch plans to come between a sailor and his wife in I.iii, Lady Macbeth herself breaks the bond with her husband by suggesting both his metaphysical and physical impotence (he is not 'a man' (I.vii.49)) because he is unworthy of the respect due to a patriarch, because he is 'a coward' (I.vii.43), and, possibly, because, as we learn later, his is 'a barren sceptre' (III.i.61). It is particularly ironic, then, that Macbeth says 'Bring forth men-children only' (I.vii.72). For the structural antitheses which the first act develops establish the relation between women, witchcraft, the undermining of patriarchal authority and sterility.

But how can the family be conceptualized if women are, literally, faithless? One way is to show that not all womanhood falls under the curse of witchcraft, and this is surely an important reason for the introduction of Lady Macduff in IV.ii, a scene which has no base in Holinshed. Indeed, it is the destruction of this 'ideal' family which leads to Macduff's revenge and the final dénouement. But Lady Macduff is introduced late in the play, and we have already been presented with another way out of the dilemma: a family without women—Duncan and his sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, Banquo and his son Fleance (at the end of the play,
Siward and his son Young Siward). On the one hand, there are the (virtuous) families of men; on the other hand, there are the antifamilies of women. And here, the notorious question, 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?' is not entirely irrelevant. For although Lady Macbeth says, 'I have given suck' (I.vii.54), her children are never seen on the stage, unlike the children of Duncan, Banquo, Macduff, and Siward. Are we not asked to accept a logical contradiction for the sake of a symbolic unity: Lady Macbeth is both an unnatural mother and sterile? This links her to the unholy family of the Witches, with their familiars and their brew which includes 'Finger of birth-strangled babe' and the blood of a sow which has eaten its own litter (IV.i.30 and 64-5). Like the Witches, Lady Macbeth and her husband constitute an 'unholy' family, a family whose only children are the 'murdering ministers'.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LADY MACBETH AND THE WITCHES

I have been writing mainly of the ways in which the Witches and Lady Macbeth function in the first Act. But their functions are not constant throughout the play. Lady Macbeth is beginning to be developed into her own antithesis even before the murder takes place. 'Nature' is reasserted through her in its most compelling guise—the Law of the Father which, in this society, founds and is founded by the Law of the King. Thus, Lady Macbeth says that she would have murdered Duncan herself 'Had he not resembled / My father as he slept' (II.ii.12-13). And in the last act, she is transformed from the pitiless instigator to murder to the guilt-ridden sleep-walker whose thoughts return to 'the old man' who had 'so much blood in him' (V.i.38). Curry interprets her sleep-walking as 'demoniacal somnambulism'. But surely this is to miss the dramatic point, which is the reassertion of 'the compunctious visitations of Nature' if only in sleep. Lady Macbeth's last words, indeed, are not of her own guilt but of the solicitous wife's care for her husband: 'give me your hand…. To bed, to bed, to bed' (V.i.64–6). But the transformation of Lady Macbeth is used to affirm developmentally the antithetical structure. It operates as a specific closure of discourse within the binary opposition of virago (witch)/wife.

If Lady Macbeth's changing function is marked by psychological change, the Witches' changing function is marked by the changing function of their prophecies. Much has been made of the fact that the Witches speak equivocally, that they are, as Macbeth says, 'imperfect speakers' (Liii.70). But the apparitions of the fourth act are progressively less equivocal, moving from the 'armed head' to the 'bloody child' to the 'child crowned' to the 'show of eight kings, the last with a glass in his hand' which shows Banquo's descendants stretched out 'to th' crack of doom' (IV.i.117). The Witches here, far from being 'imperfect speakers', conjure up a vision whose truth is established by the presence of Banquo's descendant, James I. In this prophecy of the 'good', dramatic fate (as yet incomplete) joins hands with completed political fate.

As with Lady Macbeth, then, so with the Witches: they are constructed so as to manifest their own antithesis. Cursed witches prophesy the triumph of godly rule. At one level, no doubt, this implies that even evil works providentially. As James himself had declared in the preface to Daemonologie:

> For where the deviles intention in them is ever to perish, either the soule or the body, or both of them, that he is so permitted to deale with: God by the contrarie, drawes ever out of that evill glorie to himselfe.

But at another level, the association of the Witches with the workings of Providence is part of the process by which attention is focused upon Macbeth alone. In I.i, the Witches are invoked by their familiars; in I.v, Lady Macbeth invokes the spirits. But, in the third act, it is Macbeth, who had to be 'invoked' to do the deed, who invokes the night to 'Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful Day' (III.ii.47). But Macbeth's conjunctions made even

though the treasure
Of nature's germens tumble all together,
Even till destruction sicken
lead to a future in which he, with his 'fruitless crown' (III.i.60), has no place. At the end, his only 'familiar' is 'Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts' (V.v.14).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLAY

The first act of the play is framed by images of witch-craft, rebellion and murder. At the end of the second act, an old man describes a world turned upside down, in which owls kill falcons, horses revolt against men and cannibalize each other, and night strangles day. In I.i, I.iii, III.v, and IV.i, thunder sounds. And in III.v and IV.i Hecate, who, according to Jonson, 'was believed to govern in witchcraft', appears. Indeed, IV.i, the last scene with the Witches, can be seen as the emblematic centre of the play, containing as it does both the vision of kings and the fullest display of the workings of the 'secret, black, and midnight hags' (IV.i.48). It is not my purpose to enter into the dispute about the authorship of the Hecate passages. Whether Shakespeare wrote them or not, they are perfectly in keeping with the structure of the play. Indeed, the dance of Hecate and the six Witches gives a concrete dramatization of the 'deed without a name' (IV.i.49) which reverses the whole order of 'Nature'. We need to imagine something like the Witches' dance in Jonson's The Masque of Queens (1609), which was

   full of preposterous change, and gesticulation, but most applying to their property, who at their meetings, do all things contrary to the custom of men, dancing back to back and hip to hip, their hands joined, and making their circles backward, to the left hand, with strange fantastic motions of their heads and bodies.

In the rituals of Shakespeare's Witches, as of Jonson's, a Jacobean audience could contemplate the systematic un-doing of the hierarchical ceremonies of speech, of cooking, of dancing.

It is also in Act IV, though, that the 'prayers' for a 'swift blessing' (III.vi.47) which will restore those ceremonies begin to be answered by the discovery of medicines for 'the sickly weal' (V.ii.27). At the same time, the impotence of literal medicines is made explicit by two minor characters: the English doctor who admits the impotence of his art to cure scrofula, the Scottish doctor who admits the impotence of his art to cure 'infected minds' ('More needs she the divine than the physician' (V.i.72)). The introduction of these characters should warn against any attempt to give too naturalistic an explanation of the play, since their function is largely to assert the dependence of physical health upon political and metaphysical order. Indeed, the only function of the English doctor is to dramatize the difference between his own weak art and the medicine of King Edward's 'sanctity' (IV.iii.144). (The King's power to heal scrofula, a belief which originated with Edward I, was a useful piece of royal propaganda and, although James I was himself sceptical, he ultimately agreed to take part in the healing ceremony; its propaganda value may be suggested by the fact that Charles II touched 90,798 persons in nineteen years.) Of course, King Edward offers Malcolm the practical aid of troops as well as the metaphysical aid of the 'sundry blessings' which hang about his throne (IV.iii.158). But the 'med'cines' of Malcolm's and Macduff's 'great revenge' (IV.iii.214) are guaranteed and legitimated by a godly magic which surpasses 'the great essay of art' (IV.iii.143).

Witchcraft, prophecy and magic function in Macbeth as ways of developing a particular conceptualization of social and political order. Witchcraft is associated with female rule and the overthrowing of patriarchal authority which in turn leads to the 'womanish' (both cowardly and instigated by women) killing of Duncan, the 'holy' father who establishes both family and state. This in turn leads to the reversals in the cosmic order which the Old Man and Ross describe, and to the reversals in the patriarchal order, culminating in the killing of Lady Macduff and her son. The conclusion of the play reestablishes both the offended (and offending?) father, a father, paradoxically, 'not born of woman' (V.iii.4) (does this imply that he is unnatural or untainted?), and the offended son/king. And the Witches can simply disappear, their evil supplanted by the
prophetic vision of Banquo's line and by the 'heavenly gift of prophecy' and 'miraculous work' (IV.iii. 157 and 147) of a legitimate king.

CONCLUSION

This aspect of Macbeth as a work of cultural 'ordering' could, of course, only make claims to 'truth' within a cosmology which accommodated witchcraft beliefs. That cosmology was largely defined by the Bible. There are, indeed, interesting parallels between Macbeth and the story of Saul and the Witch of Endor in the Book of Samuel (I Samuel XXVIII), a text which was dealt with by nearly every Renaissance treatise on witchcraft. Jane Jack has explored this parallel in ["Macbeth, King James and the Bible," ELH, 22 (1955)], where she writes:

Like Saul, Macbeth hears from the witches the confirmation of what he most fears. The crisis of the story is the victory of the witches: the resolution of the story is the judgement passed on Macbeth at the end—the same judgement that is passed on Saul: 'So Saul dyed for his transgression, that he committed against the word of the Lord, which he kept not, and in that he sought and asked conseil of a familiar spirit' (glossed in Geneva version as a 'witche and sorceress').

Jack goes on to assert the essentially religious tenor of Macbeth, a view which most critics of the play seem to hold. Murray, for example, maintains [in "Wh y Was Duncan's Blood Golden?", Shakespeare Survey, 19 (1966)]:

[Macbeth] is, if ever a poem were so, a traditional Catholic Christian poem, the vitality of which is rooted in an uncompromising medieval faith, and in a prescientific view of the nature of reality. Consequently it preserves in a tremendously powerful and well unified set of images one of the greatest forces in Western European culture, a force which, however alien it may seem to many of us today, we can afford neither to forget, nor to neglect, for it contains, and can still convey, much of the wisdom of human experience.

The 'Christian' interpretation is, I believe, right in so far as it recognizes that Macbeth can only be understood in relation to a particular cosmology. But Murray, like Jack, attempts to separate religion from politics in a way which was totally foreign to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinking. For instance, the Fifth Commandment ('Honour thy father and thy mother' … ) received new emphasis during this period so as to give religious underpinnings to the patriarchal state. Indeed, analogical thinking could be used not only to draw close parallels between the law of Moses and the law of the State but also to collapse traditional distinctions. Thus, in The Six Bookes of the Commonweale (1586), Bodin rejected Aristotle's distinction between political and domestic hierarchy, claiming that the family 'is the true seminane and beginning of every Commonweale.' Nor is it surprising that Bodin also wrote an influential attack upon witchcraft, Démonomanie des Sorciers (1580). If state and family were founded together, witchcraft founded the antistate together with the antifamily. James I also made the connection between state and family ('By the Law of Nature the King becomes a naturali Father to all his Lieges at his Coronation') and he too saw witchcraft as the antithesis of both. If the family was theorized as the site of conflict between hierarchy and witchcraft, that was, no doubt, because of its symbolic importance in early modern Europe when, as Natalie Davis writes [in "Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual In-version and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe," in The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society (1978)],

the nature of political rule and the newer problem of sovereignty were very much at issue. In the little world of the family, with its conspicuous tension between intimacy and power, the larger matters of political and social order could find ready symbolization.
Witchcraft, sovereignty, the family—those concepts map out the ideological terrain of *Macbeth*, a terrain which should be understood as a field of conflict, not a 'given'.

I would argue, then, that Murray is wrong in attempting to collapse the present moment of analysis back into the 'eternity' of a past 'wisdom'. What, after all, are those 'well unified set of images', which give us 'the wisdom of human experience', *about* 'unreasoning womanhood', 'eternal motherhood', mind as 'a male quality only', Murray tells us. He points, I believe, to important elements in the play, but he then requires that we *empathize* with its symbolic orderings without reference of those orderings as embodying particular manoeuvres of power.

Those manoeuvres as they relate to 'unreasoning woman-hood' are spelled out clearly enough in Krämer and Sprenger's *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), the most influential of all the Renaissance witchcraft treatises. In it, a section is dedicated to answering the question 'Why Superstition is chiefly found in Women.' The roots of witch-craft are there discovered to be in the very nature of women, a nature which includes her desire, following Eve, to betray mankind. 'She is more carnal than a man'; 'as she is a liar by nature, so in her speech she stings while she delights us'; 'her heart is a net, and her hands are bands. He that pleaseth God shall escape from her; but he that is a sinner shall be caught by her'; 'can he be called a free man whose wife governs him … ? I should call him not only a slave, but the vilest of slaves, even if he comes of the noblest family'; 'nearly all the kingdoms of the world have been overthrown by woman.' (All of these statements have analogues in *Macbeth*.) In the *Malleus*, misogyny leads to the conclusion that 'it is no matter for wonder that there are more women than men found infected with the heresy of witchcraft.' Kramer and Sprenger's advocacy of a programme of ruthless repression is a logical consequence of their fear of a supernatural power in the hands of the powerless. For who would the powerless direct their power against if not the powerful?

If Kramer's and Sprenger's beliefs were grounded in medieval Christian traditions, similar beliefs can be found in modern African societies which have been analysed by anthropologists attempting to understand the social functions of such beliefs. Esther Goody, for example, observes [in "Legitimate and Illegitimate Aggression in a West African State," in *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*] that amongst the Gonja in Ghana only women are punished for witchcraft, and she accounts for this by showing the relation between witchcraft and the prohibition against aggression amongst women, since they have been consigned to an exclusively nurturing role:

> There are two regular characteristics of the female domestic role. First, in the role of mother, a woman is a focus of emotional ties.… Then, as wife, woman is defined as subordinate to her husband. Aggression, if permitted, would threaten both these characteristics.… And if a woman strikes her husband with a stirring stick … he will become impotent; aggression in a woman's role renders a man powerless—it cannot be permitted.

A woman's refusal to be subordinated, then, is often accounted for by witchcraft. Similarly, Max Gluckman notes [in "Moral Crises: Magical and Secular Solutions," in *The Allocation of Responsibility* (1972)] that

In Nupe the evil witches who kill are women.… Nadel seeks to answer why. He finds a striking conflict between the roles which, ideally, women ought to play and that many women in fact do. Ideally, a Nupe woman should be a good wife, subservient to her husband, bearing him many children, and staying at home to care for them and their father. In reality, a great deal of trade is in the hands of women.

Women seem to be particularly vulnerable to witchcraft accusations in patrilineal, patrilocal societies, where women are cut off from their own kin and expected to merge their interests with those of their husbands' kin.
Two versions of how women operate in this kind of situation are constructed in *Macbeth*. Lady Macduff submerges her interests in her husband's, and when he flees she is totally defenceless; Lady Macbeth actively pursues her husband's interests, but only those interests which separate him from his kin. In the latter case, this leads to Macbeth's murder of his cousin, to the isolation of the husband with his 'dear wife' (III.ii.36), cut off from 'honour, love, obedience, troops of friends' (V.iii.25), and finally, to the total isolation of Macbeth in the field of battle. But the play, concentrating increasingly on Macbeth himself as it develops, does not analyse the position of women; rather, it mobilizes the patriarchal fear of unsubordinated woman, the unstable element to which Krämer and Sprenger attributed the overthrow of 'nearly all the kingdoms of the world', to which the Gonja and the Nupe attribute witchcraft.

I am not proposing to conflate the imaginary society of *Macbeth* with Gonja or Nupe society. But I am arguing for the general relevance of anthropological and sociological models of the relation between witchcraft beliefs and structures of political and social dominance. We need such models, I believe, if we are to analyse, rather than repeat, the terms of the play itself. What I have attempted to show here is the use of witchcraft as a form of ideo-logical closure within *Macbeth*, a returning of the disputed ground of politics to the undisputed ground of 'Nature'.

But the play is not, of course, about witchcraft, nor does the threat of the Biblical 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live' (Exodus, XXII. 18) hang over *Macbeth* as it hangs over *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), for instance. And it cannot be said that the witches in *Macbeth* provide the only explanatory element in the play. If their prophecies provide one motive for the killing of a king, the radical instability of the concept of 'manliness' is sufficient to precipitate the deed. But it would be misleading to interpret this overdetermination as a conflict between supernatural and natural modes of explanation, since, within the cultural context, there was no necessity to choose between those modes. (For example, Mother Sawyer in *The Witch of Edmonton* is at first abused as a witch merely because, as she complains, 'I am poor, deform'd and ignorant' (II.i.3); but the fact that she is presented sympathetically as a scapegoat—the natural explanation—is not seen as contradicting the fact that she becomes a witch—the supernatural explanation—and therefore presumably 'deserves' her death.) Nevertheless the coexistence of those modes suggests that the structural closures which I have been examining do not preclude a problematic relation between 'highly' and 'holily' (I.v.17-18).

## Macbeth (Vol. 29): Gender Issues

**Robert Kimbrough (essay date 1983)**


*[In the following essay, Kimbrough examines the portrayal of gender in *Macbeth*, maintaining that through the "unnatural" characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare endorses "androgeny"—the harmonious blending of male and female characteristics within the individual.]*

Long before "conscience was born of love," the human species had inherited a mammalian subdivision into sex, female and male, nature's way of providing generation and continuity of our species. Before mammals all generation was a unisexual operation. Post-conscience-ness sensed as much with its invention of the myth of androgyny, a myth most readily available in the Judeo-Christian version of God the Creator as an Androgyne, creating humanity in the image of that androgyny, with the division of humanity into separate sexes following, and falling hard upon. We are still suffering from the shock.

In spite of the evolution of two sexes within humanity, the internal and external physical differences between female humans and male humans remain infinitesimal; yet these small differences loom large because of the evolution of consciousness, or mind. With the evolution of mind, differences between females and males...
became ground plots for constructs of consciencess, of self and of other. Thus, female and male differences are, for the most part, matters of mind. We call these evolved and evolving attitudes of mind which stem from and are directed toward sex, matters of gender.

By Shakespeare's day, the division of humanity within the evolving world of mind had reached a state … of an almost absolute division of humanity, nor into subtypes of one species, but into separated types, each treated as if it were itself a separate species. Two worlds had evolved, two cultures had been created, masculine and feminine—not in a parallel relationship, but hierarchial: masculine first, feminine second.…

But the work of these scholars also reminds us that there is a tendency in Shakespeare to want to break down the barriers between the sex-genders. Shakespeare sensed that humanhood embraces manhood and womanhood. Shakespeare sensed that so long as one remains exclusively female or exclusively male, that person will be restricted and confined, denied human growth. Each will be the prisoner of gender, not its keeper.

Because through all of Shakespeare there runs the theme that both male and female must be liberated from the restrictions inherent in the concept of the two genders, his works move toward liberating humanity from the prisons created by inclusive and exclusive gender labeling. In Venus and Adonis, Shakespeare (in a satiric vein) asks two questions: why … can't a man be more like woman?, and why shouldn't a woman be allowed to act like a man? (Or, is not Shakespeare's actual question, given Venus's behavior, why would anyone want to act like a man?) On a social level, when a woman such as Juliet laments that she wished she had the prerogative of men and could speak out in matters of love, or when a man such as Trolius self-consciously states that he is being weak and effeminate if he shows disgust with fighting, each is trying to break out of the frustrating confines of what society has circumscribed and described as appropriate behavior for a woman or for a man.

Gender liberation in a more sustained form appears in Shakespeare when a character of one sex experiences thoughts and emotions beyond those traditionally associated with the gender values of that sex. Because a woman dressed as a man has simultaneously two genders, the theatrical device of girl-into-boy disguise provided Shakespeare with a kind of laboratory testing ground where he could isolate such moments of heightened, broadened awareness. There are seven uses of such disguise by Shakespeare, but he has only Julia in The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Portia in The Merchant of Venice, Rosalind in As You Like It, and Viola in Twelfth Night, before they enter disguise and once within, refer vividly and amusedly to male characteristics, organic as well as behavioral, sex as well as gender. As "men," Julia, Portia, Rosalind, and Viola are able to display a broader range of human character traits than they could as women only; they are liberated from the confines of socially appropriate gender behavior.

Reaching further into our humanity are the attempts to cross gender barriers found in Julius Caesar, Othello, and Macbeth. On a deep, personal level, Portia tries to break away from prescribed role in order to share with and participate in the brutal world of Brutus. Although he loves his wife, Brutus is too private a person to share with anyone else, male or female. But Desdemona and Othello each begin marriage so conditioned by their respective feminine and masculine worlds that their gestures to bridge separation are childlike and futile even before Iago separates them absolutely. From the outset we know that the relationship between Lord and Lady Macbeth has been one of mutuality and sharing; yet they, too, like Portia, Brutus, Desdemona, and Othello, are prevented from attaining and maintaining a full range of human character traits because of cultural attempts to render some exclusively feminine and some exclusively masculine.

But this is only a base-level statement, for the drama of Macbeth contains a fierce war between gender concepts of manhood and womanhood played out upon the plain of humanity. In a metaphoric sense, as well as in the final dramatic siege, Macbeth loses the battlefield. Macbeth's death, first psychic then physical, stems from his failure to allow the tender aspects of his character to check those tough characteristics which are
celebrated by the chauvinistic war ethic of his culture, championed by his wife, and defined in the extreme by the nature of the first two murderers. In his attempt to "better" himself, he is "helped" by Lady Macbeth, whose tragic career parallels and counterpoints his. Although they fail miserably on the stage of this life, Shakespeare constantly keeps before us their potential for human fulfillment. In spite of their isolating, alienating behavior in the play, a bond with the audience is maintained so that we are not merely repulsed; we are moved through pity to understand and to fear the personal and social destructiveness of polarized masculinity and femininity.

In Macbeth, and elsewhere in Shakespeare, as in Elizabethan literature in general, to be "manly" is to be aggressive, daring, bold, resolute, and strong, especially in the face of death, whether giving or receiving. To be "womanly" is to be gentle, fearful, pitying, wavering, and soft, a condition often signified by tears. That machismo was a positive cultural virtue in Shakespeare's day is what gives point to Lady Macbeth's strikes against her husband. Indeed, the play opens and closes with ceremonial and romantic emphasis on brave manhood. In the beginning, such is the theme of the description given of "brave Macbeth" by that "good and hardy soldier" whose "words become thee as thy wounds. / They smack of honor both." Even the traitor Cawdor comes in for praise: "Nothing in his life / Became him like the leaving it" (I.iv.7-8). At the end of the play, Malcolm gives young Siward the honor of leading the first charge against Macbeth's castle; Ross tells old Siward about his son's ensuing death:

Your son, my lord, has paid a soldier's debt.  
He only lived but till he was a man,  
The which no sooner had his prowess confirmed  
In the unshrinking station where he fought  
But like a man he died.  
(V.viii.39-43)

No tears for the father; to Malcolm's "He's worth more sorrow, / And that I'll spend for him," old Siward responds:

He's worth no more.  
They say he parted well and paid his score,  
And so, God be with him.  
(V.viii.50-53)

This refusal to show sorrow—rather, this complete rejection of sorrow—is so extreme that it makes most in a modern audience uncomfortable, and such a reaction may have been intended by Shakespeare, for his fullest definition of humanity involves the show of both "manly" courage and "womanly" sorrow.

When Ross announces to Macduff that his family has been exterminated, Malcolm is taken back by Macduff's complete silence. Yet, when Macduff's emotions do break out, Malcolm counsels in embarrassment, "Dispute it like a man." There follows one of those great Shakespearean moments; Macduff quietly responds, "I shall do so; / But I must also feel it as a man" (I.V.iii.220-21). Here Macduff declines to be merely manly, as that gender term has so far been defined and as is meant by Malcolm. But Macduff is not for this moment becoming merely womanly. Here he expresses a fuller range of his being: his humanhood.

In order to emphasize this significant moment, Shakespeare has Macduff reject both simplistic "feminine" and simplistic "masculine" extremes of behavior: "O, I could play the woman with my eyes / And braggart with my tongue" (11. 230-31). Macduff goes on to say, in effect, bring on Macbeth. When Malcolm responds, "This tune goes manly" (1. 235), I would like to think that Malcolm has understood the full significance of what he has seen and heard and intends "manly" to mean more than bravely—but I doubt it; Shakespeare is too aware of the moral obtuseness of ordinary human nature to make life automatically defer to art.
Nevertheless, the point Shakespeare makes through Macduff is clear: bravery and compassion are not incompatible; they are both natural, human attributes. When Macduff says, "I must also feel it as a man," had he said woman, the speech would be just as powerful because Macduff's response is a fully-realized human response.

There is no need at this point in the late twentieth century to rehearse the significances of the Shakespearean terms natural and unnatural. What is natural is good, balanced, positive, normal, generative, and healing. Such a definition is the assumption behind Macduff's rebuff to Malcolm in England: "Boundless intemperance / In Nature is a tyranny" (IV.iii.66-67). And such a definition informs Banquo's remark upon seeing the Witches: "Yo u should be women, / An d yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (I.iii.45-47). The witches are out of nature; they are unnatural because they are hermaphroditic. The point is important because Banquo's description is usually taken as a misogynous jibe. What Shakespeare reminds us is that witches have no normative sexual identity. In fact, one of a witch's most pronounced and commonly invoked powers was to destroy normal sexuality, be it in a man or in a woman. Furthermore, witches have the ability to turn a woman into a man (although, not a man into a woman). An d it is in this doubled context that Lady Macbeth's famous "unsex me" speech (I.v.39 ff.) can be labeled unnatural. The "spirits" she invokes might just as well be Macbeth's witches.

Within the interlocking microcosms of Elizabethan thought, killing a human, a king, a guest, and a kinsman are, of course, all unnatural acts, and Lady Macbeth is afraid that her husband's nature is too good—or, too natural—to allow him to commit murder:

    Yet I do fear thy nature.
    It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness.
    (I.v.14-15)

The phrase makes us pause, rings in our ears: "The milk of human kindness." No other expression better reveals Shakespeare's basically optimistic vision of the nature of humankind (except possibly Miranda's speeches). "Human kindness" was still a redundancy in Shakespeare's day because to be kind was to be human. Kindness is humanness; mankind is humankind. Mensch.

And "the milk of human kindness"—how perfect. Basic nourishment, passed from mother to child—generation after generation. Madonna and child, symbol of goodness and love—human kindness. No wonder the language of Lady Macbeth's command to her own witches always startless us:

    Come to my woman's breasts
    And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
    Wherever in your sightless substances
    You wait on nature's mischief.
    (I.v.45-48)

Yes, nature's first mischief was the unnatural act of fratricide. Yes, we live in a fallen world where "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." We live in Macbeth's world. The Thane of Fife had a wife:

    Whither should I fly?
    I have done no harm. But I remember now
    I am in this earthly world, where to do harm
    Is often laudable, to do good sometime
    Accounted dangerous folly. Why then, alas,
    Do I put up that womanly defense
To say I have done no harm?
(IV.ii.72-78)

Evil is a natural phenomenon, even though we call it unnatural. We do so, for confronting evil reality is the
countervailing power of the milk of human kindness, a redemptive force of nature.

Shakespeare keeps the contrast of natural and unnatural before us when he again uses the metaphor of
nourishment in Lady Macbeth's later direct challenge to her husband:

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.
(I.vii.54-59)

Lady Macbeth knows that love, compassion, pity, remorse are all emotions which Macbeth has in his nature
and which she must repress in him in order for Macbeth to carry on with the “bloody” business.

And she states before he arrives that she must repress in herself these same forces, which she clearly thinks of
as feminine (Buckingham ironically praises Richard's "tenderness of heart / And gentle, kind effeminate
remorse" [R3, III.vii.20 1-02]). Here is the "unsex me" speech ad-dressed to her own witches:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood;
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between
Th' effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring
ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief.
(I.v.38-48, italics added)

Lady Macbeth wants to become cruel, which is a so-called masculine trait. But in order to become cruel, she
must close off the flow of blood from having "access and passage" to the heart, which is the seat of love, the
source of "remorse," pity, compassion, and contrition—all of which are "compunctious" (Shakespeare coined
the word) attributes of our human nature. Human nature, in turn, takes its shape and being from the vital
spirits that are carried in the atomies of the bloodstream, a major function of which, according to Aristotle and
the Elizabethans, was to keep the heart alive. When the blood stops flowing into the heart, the heart loses its
source of vitality and hardens—which leads to despair and suicide, the ultimate murder, the sin against life
itself (hence the unpardonable sin). Shakespeare is saying that compunction (the ayenbyte of inwyt) is natural
and therefore human. But Lady Macbeth and her society have labeled remorse and pity as merely "feminine."
She and her society confuse womanhood and humanhood. In rejecting that which she has been made to think
is weak and womanly within her in order to become cruel and manly, she moves away from her humanity
ward the demonic, toward becoming a life-denying witch instead of toward that sixteenth-century secular

262
ideal, Dame Nature, the androgynous force that created the world and keeps it in motion toward fulfillment.

We are told before we meet him that Macbeth is "noble," and he shows us in the presence of the witches that he is "compunctious" because the confrontation with the "supernatural soliciting" "doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs / Against the use of nature" (I.iii.130, 135-37, italics added). The "If it were done when 'tis done" soliloquy (I.vii.1 ff.) is all about conscience, and by the time his wife appears on stage he has concluded that "We will proceed no further in this business" (1. 31). When Lady Macbeth calls him afraid, casts doubt on his "act and valor," and taunts him with "Letting 'I dare not' upon 'I would,'" still he can wisely, humanly answer,

Prithee peace!
I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dare do more is none.
(I.vii.40,44,45-47)

Here Macbeth has the humanists' view of humanity: "I dare do all that may become a man"—I am sufficiently courageous to do whatever is fitting to humanity, what is appropriate in the fullest sense. This is the climax of the opening action of the play: "We will proceed no further.… I dare do all that may become a man." Macbeth has so far shown strength and dignity and seems activated by the milk of human kindness, by compunctious visitings of nature.

In a sense, the play at this point becomes Lady Macbeth's, although Macbeth remains the main actor, for he cannot resist and counter her next speech. She responds immediately to the philosophic nature of his reply concerning what is right action in terms of manhood and humanhood by retorting boldly:

What beast was't then
That made you break this enterprise to me?
(11. 47-48, italics added)

She is on target; we have seen Macbeth tempted by the witches and have just heard him admit his ambition. She insists on her definition of manhood as cruel, fearless, active, consistent, and brave in behalf of which she has sought to "unsex" herself (rather, uncultivate her cultivated feminine self): "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (1. 49). Not valor and courage, but guts and balls. To this, she adds the appeal of "bettering" one's self, using "man" in a quite modern, colloquial manner (by way of Nietzsche):

And to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man.
(11. 50-51)

She then cleverly ties these two meanings together when she sarcastically adds that now having the time and place fit for murder "Does unmake you" (1. 54)—unmans you and uncrowns you. The ultimate challenge to his machismo—"I have given suck … " (11. 54-59)—has been quoted above. Now, she here takes charge, and presents the plan for murder. Macbeth's reluctant agreement is presented through the metaphor of the manly woman:

Bring forth men-children only;
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males.
(11. 72-74)
Macbeth has succumbed to the gender definitions of male and female of his society as they have been expressed by Lady Macbeth—divided, separated definitions which reject the bonding nurture of the milk of human kindness—as can be seen in his reductive, simplistic syllogism: all men are tough; you are tough; therefore, all children coming from you will be, should be, had better be men. Even though his response is strained and sarcastic, it shows his conversion to her point of view. The two are in league against humanity.

While Macbeth has acquiesced to a definition of masculinity which comes from dominant societal norms that equate machismo with manhood, Shakespeare does not allow us to forget that once Macbeth had a fuller vision, nor does he try to shift the blame for Macbeth's fall to Lady Macbeth. The "dagger" speech (II.i.33 ff.) arises from Macbeth's conscience (a sign of "compunctious visitings of nature"), but this soliloquy does not end with any "We will proceed no further." This time, before Lady Macbeth enters, the bell rings and Macbeth concludes, "I go, and it is done" (1. 62). He is on his way literally and figuratively to becoming the kind of man his wife has urged. When he pretends to discover the murder of Duncan, his words have piercing ironic truth:

> from this instant
> There's nothing serious in mortality:
> All is but toys.

(II.iii.88-90)

For him, this is precise truth; once he has destroyed the order of nature, all is reduced to relativity. Hence, his rhetorical question is devastatingly ironic:

> Who can be wise, amazed, temp'reate and furious,
> Loyal and neutral, in a moment? No man.

(11. 104-05)

No, not the kind of man he is becoming, but the ideal answer is any man—or, all humanity. Still, he presents his thoughts within a philosophic framework, one now perverted:

> The expedition of my violent love
> Outrun the pauser, reason.

> Who could refrain
> That had a heart to love, and in that heart
> Courage to make 's love known?

(11. 106-14)

Shakespeare was well aware that courage means heart-stuff; we still say "take heart," meaning, be calmly resolute, be patient—a meaning opposite to Macbeth's counsel: "Let's briefly put on manly readiness" (I. 129).

"Manly readiness" is what the two murderers have when they respond to Macbeth's challenge to carry out revenge against Banquo: "We are men, my liege" (III.i.91). The bitterness of Macbeth's long diatribe, "Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men" (1. 92), takes its force from our recognition that Macbeth is like these men even while some vestige of his former vision—"I dare do all that may become a man"—shines through.

This is the kind of counterplay that informs the banquet scene (which I am tempted to call the further milking of Macbeth). When Banquo's ghost first appears, Lady Macbeth tries to calm her husband by a near-Pavlovian technique; she says in aside to him: "Are you a man?" Shakespeare's first repetition of the verb "dare" in Macbeth's answer signals the degree that Macbeth has slipped from true manhood:
Ay, and a bold one, that dare to look on that
Which might appal the devil.

(III.iv.50-60, italics added)

Still, compunctious visitings of nature continue to shake him, bringing Lady Macbeth to direct irony, but embracing ironies only fully apparent to us and Shakespeare:

O proper stuff!
This is the very painting of your fear.
This is the air-drawn dagger which you said
Led you to Duncan. O, these flaws and starts
(Imposters to true fear) would well become
A woman's story at a winter's fire,
Authorized by her grandam.

What, quite unmanned in folly?
(11. 60-73)

The conscience-invoked dagger was a sign of true (reasonable) fear; thus, Shakespeare indicates that Lady Macbeth's mockingly "feminine" "flaws and starts" are not "Imposters to true fear" as she claims, but are final visitings of nature which could redeem, restore, or re-make Macbeth.

With the second entry of Banquo, Macbeth is even more distracted, and Shakespeare has him return for a third time to the concept of daring, calling attention to how far Macbeth has drifted away from his earliest vision. There is frenzy now in his rejection of conscience:

What man dare, I dare.
Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,
The armed rhinoceros, or th' Hyrcan tiger;
Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble. Or be alive again
And dare me to the desert with thy sword.
If trembling I inhabit then, protest me
The baby of a girl.

(11. 99-106, italics added)

Macbeth here makes the final division of humanhood into manhood and womanhood, mere derring-do and cowardice. Thus his words when Banquo leaves for the last time have a fulfilled ironic thematic significance: "Why, so, being gone, / I am a man again" (11.107-08). He is not a girl baby, but one of Lady Macbeth's "men-children."

Shakespeare returns to this motif of manhood at the very end of the play. On finding out about Macduff's Caesarean delivery (considered to be an unnatural manner of birth), Macbeth gasps:

Accursed be that tongue that tells me so,
For it hath cowed my better part of man.

(V.viii.17-18)

Johnson defined "cowed" as depressed with fear, dispirited, overawed, intimidated. Indeed, the tragedy of Macbeth lies in the fact that during the course of the play his "better part of man" has increasingly been repressed by his worse part, his merely tough part. The positive vision of human kindness—as illustrated
through Macduff's re-action to the slaughter of his family, and seemingly at the outset felt and acknowledged by Macbeth—has almost been completely lost. After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth's heart had received fewer and fewer visits from compunctious nature. Because his heart has been gradually hardening, Macbeth can no longer feel, or, rather, has just enough memory of feeling to highlight his isolation:

I have almost forgot the taste of fears.
The time has been my senses would have cooled
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir
As life were in't. I have supped full with
horrors.
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
Cannot once start me.

(V. v. 9-15)

At the beginning of the play, the sight and unnatural temptings of the witches did rouse and stir his hair (I. iii. 135); now, at this point, he admits his state of degeneration. The kind promptings of nature have become so sluggish, so deadened, that nothing can startle him. His heart is hardening. He has sentenced himself to solitary confinement.

Why is it, then, that we do not detest Lord and Lady Macbeth? Both are clearly evil. She is early determined to play the serpent (I. v. 24-25) and from the outset we are given the disturbing suspicion that even before encountering the witches Macbeth has entertained the unnatural act of regicide:

My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smothered in surmise and nothing is
But what is not.

(I. iii. 139-42)

Why can we not simply dismiss them? We cannot because they are all too human throughout—through them Shakespeare appeals to our shared humanity, our potential for a human fulfillment which rises above gender division.

Lady Macbeth's death proves her humanity, for it shows that she was not as tough as she thought she was. Ironically, to Elizabethans, insanity and suicide were considered signs of weakness, signs of cowardice, therefore partaking of the "feminine." (Ophelia's suicide is handled more tolerantly than it would have been even had she been a man of equal social status.) Lady Macbeth's culture, however, did not allow her to truly develop her full self. She operates from the restrictive base assumptions of a culturally defined feminine self. Furthermore, when she says "unsex me," she really means ungender me, which serves to point up the cultural confusion and misunderstandings of sex and gender in the seventeenth century, let alone the twentieth. And the irony of this attempt to masculcst hersel: is highlighted by the fact that she was trying to be the "good and dutiful" wife of the newly emerging middle-class culture, trying to "better" her husband.... Through a literal self-effacement, she attempts to back and support her spouse in his worldly ambition and to force him to compete in the male hierarchy. But in trying to act a socially appropriate role, she acts unnaturally; she moves counter to the pulls of kindness. She cannot deny her humanity: insanity is the only path out of the position she has fashioned. Yet, even in her resolution and in her madness, there is moving recognition of the bond of nature: "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't" (II. ii. 12-13); "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" (V. i. 35).
So too with Macbeth. No matter how steeped in blood, he never loses sight of a different life, a truly better life:

My way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.

(V.iii.22-28, italics added)

This fourth and final use of "dare" embraces both senses of manhood—I should not and I cannot—and tends to bring Macbeth back into the pale of humanity. The speech allows us to pity Macbeth because it shows he retains a vision of a fuller, healthier, "wholier" life, even though he has narrowed his life, repressed his nature, choked his human kindness.

And a final humanizing touch throughout the play is that Lord and Lady Macbeth love each other. From the outset we can observe from the way they address, treat, and respect each other that theirs is what society calls a "good" marriage; their love is what gives power to Macbeth's resigned, thoughtful response to the announcement that "The Queen, my lord, is dead":

She should have died hereafter:
There would have been a time for such a word.

(V.v.16-18)

In the natural course of events, Lady Macbeth would have lived her life through to its natural end. But, he, she, they have prevented all that. Now, time merely "Creeps in this petty pace from day to day"; life now to Macbeth is merely:

a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(V.v.19-28)

Lord and Lady Macbeth may end in despair, but we do not share that state with them. While Shakespeare in Macbeth criticizes the destructive polarity of masculine versus feminine, constantly informing the play is his recognition of a fuller, healthier way of life, his vision of potential human wholeness, his androgynous vision.

Shakespeare, in Macbeth and all of his plays, holds a mirror up before our human nature which reflects honestly, in depth, the good and ill together. This act stems from his assumption that human nature is essentially good and beautiful; that it has a potential for positive fulfillment. Shakespeare's impulse is to help us overcome the limitations imposed by every day actuality as experienced in nature and society, only one of which is gender. While one hopes that the ultimate, long-range effect of Shakespeare's art is external (political), the plea for human liberation in that art appeals to the individual, and any degree of social realization will retain its roots within the individual, within our humanity.

Shakespeare, saying farewell to his theater, modestly said that his "aim" was "but to please," and please he does because his appeal is to our "better part," that aspect of our nature nurtured by "the milk of human kindness." Shakespeare has pleased many and pleased long because his is the art of human kindness. With Shakespeare as our text and example, we can learn that art of human kindness, and we can undertake the essay
toward androgyny.

The concept of androgyny tends to frighten and disturb—and well it should because the potential for androgyny, which is part of our essential nature, can, if stimulated, cause shock waves, which will disturb the arrangement and display of our surface selves. Coleridge located the radical placement of androgyny when he casually remarked on September 1, 1832 (in *Table Talk*), "The truth is, a great mind must be androgynous." This truth is beautifully acknowledged by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, during the course of which she returns again and again to Shakespeare as the great example of androgyny realized. Her phrase is "unity of mind." Androgyny, then, may be defined as fully realized humanity. Because this state of mind is rarely attained and, when achieved, nearly impossible to maintain, androgyny is an ideal goal—a vision of unity and harmony beyond the confines of gender, within the confines of the human.

**Carolyn Asp (essay date 1981)**


[In the following essay, Asp contends that the transformation of Macbeth's character results from his becoming an extreme masculine stereotype.]

Almost without exception people feel constrained to play roles in accordance with what they believe to be the expectations of others. The individual suspects that he can only become a part of his society through performing roles which are defined by both negative and positive sanctions of law, custom, and accepted norms of behavior. A stereotype is an intensification of a role which typifies in an unvarying pattern a conception, opinion, or belief concerning appropriate modes of behavior. Stereotypes frequently narrow the expression of human personality and the range of authentic sexual identity by embodying a conventional and superficial view of the roles men and women are to play in social interaction and even in their perceptions of themselves. They not only make self-knowledge difficult; they impede authentic communication and create a society in which fixed ideas and modes of response are accepted and even admired. Because stereotypes focus on one aspect of the personality and dis-regard or denigrate others, they create models which, ironically, are almost impossible to embody because they fragment and narrow the personality rather than unify or express it.

The examination of sexual stereotyping is one of Shakespeare's enduring interests, and is found in plays as diverse as *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. In *Macbeth* the phenomenon of such stereotyping is highly developed and central to the tragic action. Lady Macbeth consciously attempts to reject her feminine sensibility and adopt a male mentality because she perceives that her society equates feminine qualities with weakness. The dichotomy between role and nature which ensues ends with her mental disintegration and suicide. Macbeth's case is more complicated. In the play the male stereotype is associated with violence made socially and ethically acceptable through the ritual of warfare. Under the urging of his wife, Macbeth not only accepts the narrow definition of manhood that the stereotype imposes but he agrees to act that role for self-aggrandizement. Unlike his wife's role-assumption, Macbeth's is not in conflict with his nature; rather, it is an expression of a certain aspect of it. It tempts him to exercise godlike power through the violence it calls courage and aspire to freedom from consequences and invulnerability from mortal danger. But because it releases anarchic forces within him and allows him to give full play to his intense egoism, it seals his doom both psychologically and socially.

When the play opens, Macbeth is presented as the most complete representative of a society which values and honors a manliness and soldiership that maintain the cohesiveness of the tribe by extreme violence, if necessary. Even before he appears on stage he is admiringly described as the quintessential warrior, the upholder of tribal unity in the face of rebellion. The account of his battle with Macdonwald is meant to portray him as a man of fearless courage whose valor is the very symbol of his manhood, yet the description of the
traitor's disembowelment emphasizes cruelty and violence rather than courage. In the eyes of his peers and his sovereign, however, he is the "brave" and "noble" Macbeth. In such a world, as Edmund says in King Lear, "to be tender minded / Does not become a sword" (V.iii.31-2). Ironically, it is the "gracious" Duncan who is the only man in the play who could be called "tender minded." Thanking his generals, he exclaims, "My plenteous joys wanton in fullness, seek to hide themselves / In drops of sorrow" (I.iv.35-6). Duncan's sentimental joy over the bloody victory emphasizes the fundamental weakness of a warrior society that condones and rewards in its heroes a violence that, unregulated by ritual or power, can turn against it. The conviction that valor is the whole of virtue (virtus) can displace the values of peace with those of war and cause the metamorphosis of the human into inhuman being.

Among the warriors expressions of tenderness are considered either degrading or counter-productive. When Rosse is moved to tears by Lady Macduff's complaints, he says, "I am so much the fool, should I stay longer, / It would be my disgrace, and your discomfort" (IV.ii.28-9). Anghished by the news of his family's massacre, Macduff tries to repress his tears, admitting that they make him "play the woman." Urged by Malcolm to "dispute it like a man," he at first rejects the stereotypical response and tells the prince, "I must also feel it like a man," that is, like a complete human being who can integrate both feminine and masculine responses. It is significant that at this major turning point in the action Shakespeare emphasizes the full humanity of Macduff, the pre-ordained instrument of retribution. If only for a moment he transcends the stereotype. Then under the pressure of Malcolm he converts his "feminine" grief to manly revenge, crying out: "front to front, / Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself! / Within my sword's length set him" (IV.iii.235-7). Only a fully human warrior can confront and conquer the "fiend" that Macbeth has become.

The manly stereotype in this play exceeds the limits of soldierly valor and embraces the extreme of retaliatory violence. This attitude permeates society from noble to bondsman. On one end of the scale Macduff's cry "He has no children!" voices his frustration at being balked of complete vengeance. On the other end, the murderers whom Macbeth suborns to kill Banquo assert, "We are men, my liege" when Macbeth asks them if they will suffer Banquo's "crimes." Macbeth agrees that "in the catalogue ye go for men" (III.i.91), yet he makes a distinction between the catalogue of men and the "valu'd file": there is no basis for identity as a man merely in declaring one's male gender or membership in the human race. In Macbeth's mind manhood is not a constant, fixed quality but one which must continually be proved by manly deeds. So he asks them to define themselves further: "Now if you have a station in the file / Not i'th'worst rank of manhood, say't" (III.i.101-2). One declares that the vile buffets of the world have incensed him to recklessness; the other, weary with disasters, would set his life on any chance. Both men dare to take the course of their lives into their own hands and prove their manhood in violently self-assertive action. Under Macbeth's questioning, a sophistical syllogism emerges from the conversation: the valued man is the courageous man; the courageous man will dare even murder to right the wrongs done to him; therefore, the valued man is he who will dare to commit murder. By this reasoning, Macbeth justifies himself as well as his agents.

Although a definition of manhood in terms of qualities such as daring and ruthlessness is not totally invalid, it is incomplete, as Macbeth knows in his deepest being. Initially he rejects his wife's call to violence, emphasizing the limits that circumscribe human/humane action: "I dare do all that may become a man, / Who dares do more is none" (I.vii.46-7). He fears the inhuman, godlike power that overstepping the limits implies; he fears to lose his humanity in the exercise of "manly" deeds. Macbeth has an inchoate grasp of the idea that being human means accepting the limits imposed by social interconnectedness, by one's rank and role. He cherishes the "golden opinions" he has won from his peers by circumscribed action. Although he seems unsure of his own relationship to the concept of true manhood, he can recognize in Banquo a complete man whose "royalty of nature" and sexual potency he fears yet admires. Macbeth admits that Banquo, like himself, "dares much," yet

… to that dauntless temper of his mind,
He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour
To act in safety.

(III.i.49-51)

As Eugene Waith comments [in "Manhood and Valor in Two Shakespearean Tragedies," *ELH*, XVI I (1950)]: "True manhood is a comprehensive ideal, growing out of the familiar Christian concept that man is between beasts and angels in the hierarchy of creation. To be worthy of this station, a man must show more than physical valor which characterizes the soldier and traditionally distinguishes the male of the species."

A major part of Macbeth's agony is created by his recognition of what constitutes full manhood and his conflicting acceptance of an incomplete stereotype. Why, knowing what he does, does he accept it? Because he succumbs to the temptation that faces every tragic hero set within a world of limits; the temptation to override those limits and establish himself as an omnipotent center of reference. The stereotype gives Macbeth a role whereby to act out a species of godlike power which manifests itself in the ability to take human life with impunity. The tragic irony of his situation, of which he gradually becomes aware, is that in the actualization of this "godlike" potential he becomes inhuman, less the man, in the full understanding of the word.

The text indicates that Macbeth is an effective killer on the battlefield, but as a representative figure, he is no more violent than any man could be, nor is he any more of a killer than the warriors who are his peers. What differentiates Macbeth from other males in the play is his intense awareness of the potential for violence within him and his willingness to entertain *unrestricted* fantasies as to how that potential might be used. Immediately after his first encounter with the Weird Sisters he asks himself:

… why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature?

(I.iii.134-7)

Later he bids the stars hide their fires lest his dark desires be exposed to even a glimmer of light. He is a man terrified yet fascinated by the power within him. This is why he initially seeks limits, calling upon the restraints that morality and society can impose upon him. When his wife describes him as "too full of the milk of human kindness," she bases her interpretation of his character on those energies of restraint (fear, human respect, conscience) to which he conforms his outward behavior. Understanding his fascination with violence but not his terror of its effects, she forces him to ask himself whether or not he dares to risk acting out the potential that is in him in order to objectify the possibilities of his self. If he does not dare, will he ever know himself and his possibilities? The question he must ask himself is whether or not the consequences of purely self-defining action will destroy his humanity. Macbeth senses that once he enacts his deep desires he will be radically transformed. Inhuman energy will be generated from this commitment to self-realization uninhibited by responsibility. He, even more than his wife, realizes clearly that "what is done, is done / And cannot be undone." Since the effort to be inhuman is essential to the service of Mars, the limited definition of manhood associated with soldierly valor is perfectly suited to Macbeth's project of self-divinization.

In Macbeth's Scotland, violence and its accompanying qualities are limited to the male. Women are subordinate to men and divorced from political influence because they lack those qualities that would fit them for a warrior society. Rosse, describing Scotland's dire state, says that the crisis is so unnatural it would "make our women fight" (IV.iii.187). This comment suggests that Shakespeare took liberties with his source in order to create an artistic world in which he could examine male and female stereotypes. [In his *Chronicles of Scotland*, 1587] Holinshed actually writes of this period that "in these daies also the women of our countries were of no lesse courage than the men; for all stout maidens and wives (if they were not with child) marched as well in the field as did the men, and so soone as the armie did set forward, they slue the first living creature
that they found, in whose bloud they not onlie bathed their swords, but also tasted thereof with their mouthes."
The stereotypical role of women in the play, however, defines them as weak, dependent, non-political, incapable of dealing with violence except to become its victims. After Duncan's murder, when Lady Macbeth demands to know "what's the business," Macduff describes the typical feminine reaction to such news:

O gentle lady,
'Tis not for you to hear what I can speak:
The repetition in a woman's ear,
Would murther as it fell.

(II.iii.84-6)

Macduff, like Hotspur, refuses to share his political life with his wife; instead, he leaves for England without a word to her. She resents his departure and interprets it as a desertion. Rosse, in a patronizing manner, counsels her to "school" herself, excusing Macduff's behavior on the grounds that her husband is "noble, wise, judicious," in political life and must, as a result, be a good husband and father. Even though Macduff and his wife seem to be the normative couple in the play, their communication with and understanding of each other fall far short of that exhibited between Macbeth and his wife early in the action. Until he is bowed by calamity, Macduff lacks the capability for sympathetic communion that Macbeth possesses: he fails to foresee his wife's sorrow and anger and he seems unaware of the real danger to which he has exposed his family by his absence. The action of the play proves his wife's complaints to be justified. Significantly, Macduff and Lady Macduff never appear on the stage together.

In his conversation with Malcolm, Macduff exhibits a condescending attitude toward women, whom he separates into saints and whores. When Malcolm claims to be an arch-voluptuary, Macduff cynically assures him:

We have willing dames enough; there cannot be
That vulture in you, to devour so many
As will to greatness dedicate themselves.

(IV.iii.72-4)

On the other hand, he approves of the fact that Malcolm's mother was "oftener upon her knees than on her feet, / Died every day she liv'd" (IV.iii.110-13), a royal hermitess rather than an imperial jointress.

In a society in which femininity is divorced from strength and womanliness is equated with weakness, where the humane virtues are associated with womanliness, the strong woman finds herself hemmed in psychologically, forced to reject her own womanliness, to some extent, if she is to be true to her strength. Lady Macbeth is such a woman, worthy of the equality her husband bestows upon her early in their relationship when he calls her "my dearest partner of greatness." Macbeth here shows himself remarkably free from the chauvinistic attitudes that domi-nate his society. It certainly seems his intent to share power with her and establish a kind of joint-rule that would fly in the face of custom. It is obvious that she is attracted by the prospect of wielding power in her own right, but there is no evidence to indicate that she wants royal status for herself alone. Convinced that she must work through her husband if they are both to attain greatness, she scrutinizes his weaknesses and determines to "chastise with the valour of [her] tongue / All that impedes [him] from the golden round" (I.v.29-30). Her valor throughout the play is, as she describes it here, primarily rhetorical. Her role, as she perceives it, is to evoke her husband's "noble strength" so that he can act in accord with his desires. To do this she must appeal as a woman to his manliness as well as channel her energies into maintaining a persona of masculine courage.…

Lady Macbeth has so internalized the stereotypes of her society that she is convinced that she must divest herself of her femininity if she is to have any effect on the public life of her husband. She calls upon the
"murdering ministers" to turn her maternal milk to vengeful gall, to "unsex" her…. Yet, in spite of her dire invocations, her conscious desire to take on a male psyche, her fundamental, even unconscious femininity breaks through the surface of her arguments with her husband before Duncan's murder. In these arguments she wages a sexual assault which can only be successful if Macbeth perceives her as intensely female. When she describes him as a husband/ lover who, like his hope of glory, has become "pale," "green," and "waning," she challenges an essential element of his self-image, that of potent male, which is the foundation of all his other roles. To be the heroic warrior, to be king, he must first act the man with her. When this role is threatened by her scorn, when the symbol of his whole enterprise is founded to be flaccid or unacceptable ("from this time, / Such I account thy love" I.vii.38-9), the collapse of what might be called the male ego is imminent. She implies that she will find him unacceptable if he is afraid "to be the same in [his] own act and valour / As [he is] in desire" (I.vii.40-1). Only if he dares to do the deed will he be a man, and so much more the man, in her esteem. The whole argument to murder is couched in sexual terms: she accuses him of arousing her expectations and then failing to follow through with action. What man would not try to disprove that accusation?

What potency is to the male, maternity is to the female. Lady Macbeth plays on both of these physical/psychological states that are fundamentally associated with the sexual stereotypes in the play. On the one hand, she taunts her husband to show his potency in performance; on the other, she offers to negate her own maternal power as an example of her dedication. While her rhetoric of violence convinces her husband to move beyond the limit and take on the role of "manly" murderer, the images she uses refer directly to her physical femaleness: "I would … / Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums" (I.vii.56-7). Macbeth's admiring command ironically affirms the very maternal instinct she boasts of denying:

Bring forth men children only!
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males.

(I.vii.73-5)

Finally, she assures him of invincibility. When he hesitates, entertaining the possibility of failure and discovery, she merely asks contemptuously: "We fail?" She affirms that daring and courage will overcome all obstacles, an idea later echoed by the prophecies: "Be bloody, bold and resolute" (IV.i.79).

In spite of her pragmatic and ruthless rhetoric, it is obvious that the gall in her breasts has not been sufficient to unsex Lady Macbeth. She admits that she has relied on wine to make her bold and give her fire, qualities normally associated with the masculine temperament. When Macbeth appears after the murder she calls him "my husband," the only time in the play she addresses him by that familiar title that emphasizes the sexual bond between them. It connotes a certain desired reliance on his strength, indicating that she is not as independent as the stress of her role demands. The staccato rhythm of her speech preceding and just after her husband's entrance betrays an anxiety that not even the wine can mitigate. It is only when she realizes that her husband is losing control that she resumes the dominant role she would much rather he played.

Ironically, her assumption of a masculine role does not create partnership; rather, it distances Lady Macbeth from her husband. As long as he retained elements of so-called feminine sensibility, he was susceptible to her appeal: there was a "weakness" in him that responded to her challenge. After he fully assumes the stereotype she urges upon him, there is nothing in him she can manipulate. Her dream of being partner to his greatness is doomed by the very means she has used to insure that greatness. By making him "manly" she has guaranteed that he will think of her as subordinate and unworthy of truly sharing power. Her action shares with his a peculiarly self-defeating thrust.

After Duncan's murder Lady Macbeth begins to admit the breakdown of congruence between the role she is playing and the person she is; alone, she admits: "Nought's had, all's spent, / Where our desire's got without
content" (III.ii.4-5). A dawning realization of the self (her repressed dimension of womanliness) behind the mask is essential to her tragic identity. When Macbeth morosely enters she resumes the mask and acts the strong companion. Unmoved, her husband echoes her internal apprehensions:

Better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy.

(III.ii.19-22)

Although united in the same embrace of misery, each is isolated in a separate world of suffering. "The affliction of these terrible dreams / That shake us nightly" (III.ii.18-19) drives the partners apart even in the marriage bed.

It is ironic that throughout this scene Macbeth addresses his wife in terms of intimacy and affection, calling her "love," and "dearest chuck," while at the same time, he deliberately deceives her about the murder of Banquo. It is evident that she is no longer in his confidence, for when she asks "what's to be done?" he tells her "be ignorant of the knowledge … till thou applaud the deed" (III.ii.45). His refusal to answer her question parallels Macduff's earlier reluctance to answer her when she inquired "What's the business?" It can be argued that Macbeth deceives his wife to protect her from implication in Banquo's murder, yet in spite of this overtly good motive, his attitude reveals a patronizing and stereotyped point of view. In their conversation it is almost as though Macbeth is testing his wife's reactions. When he remarks in a seemingly casual way that "Banquo and his Fleance lives" her answer comes up to the mark: "But in them Nature's copy's not eterne" (III.ii.38). It is a subdued response, lacking her earlier vehemence and conviction. It cannot be that Macbeth wishes to protect her from the fact of the murder since he drops too many hints as to the nature of the deed. His tactic seems geared deliberately to impress upon her that it is he who has planned and initiated the action that will result in Banquo's death, that he has internalized her "bloody instructions" so successfully that he no longer needs her. When he perceives that she "marvels" at his words, he lamely justifies his conduct by telling her "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill" (III.ii.55).

The last time we see Macbeth and his wife together is during the banquet scene as they attempt to preside over the festivities. As the scene opens Macbeth reiterates certain norms that guide human and humane conduct: "You know your degrees," (III.iv.1) he tells his guests, emphasizing the structure of hierarchy and limit that governs responsible social interaction. The banquet itself is an archetypal human situation which involves feasting and communality: it symbolizes that "living with" or conviviality that is the keynote of humane behavior. Macbeth can only play at being a part of the human scene: "Ourself will mingle with society / And play the humble host" (III.iv.4-5 [italics mine]). Lady Macbeth significantly "keeps her state," remaining apart from the group. When the inhuman world breaks in upon him in the form of Banquo's ghost, his wife, oblivious to the phenomenon, berates him for not even acting "the man." Her failure to see the ghost indicates that she has no real affinity with the realm of the inhuman. Macbeth, on the other hand, seems to have the power not only to communicate with this realm but actually to conjure it. The ghost appears only after Macbeth hypocritically wishes that Banquo were present. When Lady Macbeth asks him the old question "Are you a man?," he affirms the stereotype: "Ay , and a bold one, that dare look on that / Which might appall the Devil" (III.iv.58-9). It is obvious then that Macbeth does not fear the ghost itself but what the ghost signifies: the extent and limits of his own power. This encounter is a moment of truth in which Macbeth clearly sees his affinity with and power over the inhuman world; his ability to summon the ghost, even inadvertently, proves how far he has stepped beyond the limits of humanity. In this confrontation he hysterically resorts to violent physical prowess as his standard of courage: "What man dare, I dare" (III.iv.98), he boasts. Like the old Macbeth, he longs to prove himself in single combat: "Be alive again, / And dare me to the desert with thy sword" (III.iv.102-3); but Banquo represents a realm of existence with which Macbeth is engaged but which
he cannot confront with a sword. At the same time that the ghost affirms Macbeth's alienation from the human community it also manifests the limits that plague his ambition to act with impunity. The role of manliness may allow him to act with imagined godlike freedom but it cannot guarantee that the deed will be done when it is done. The ghost is a reminder that although Banquo may be dead, Macbeth cannot escape the consequences of that death. It thrusts the very conditions of his humanness into his face:

… the time has been
That, when the brains were out, the man would
die,
And there an end; but now they rise again,
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,

And push us from our stools.

(III.iv.77-81)

As Macbeth had conjured up the apparition so he dismisses it, calling it an "unreal mockery," asserting that "it being gone /I am a man again" (III.iv.107). For Macbeth, "being a man" has become synonymous with being invulnerable to conscience, fear, or compassion, in a word, with assuming to himself godlike qualities and powers. Throughout the banquet he is almost completely divorced from the human situation of which he is the center; he creates "most admir'd disorder" by his obsessive engagement with the realm of the inhuman. The feast disintegrates, bonds of fellowship and rank are disregarded, and Lady Macbeth commands the guests, "Stand not upon the order of your going, / But go at once" (III.iv.118-19).

Just as Macbeth was oblivious to his guests during the banquet, so he is oblivious to his wife after it. Focused intensely inward, he plots in solitude his future schemes. The distance between husband and wife is accentuated by the formal "Sir" with which she addresses him. As in Act II, scene ii, the action concludes with Lady Macbeth's invitation to bed: "You lack the season of all natures, sleep" (III.iv.140), a subtle hint expressing her need for the intimacy of the boudoir. Macbeth, however, is preoccupied with his determination to seek out the Weird Sisters: "now I am bent to know, / By the worst means, the worst" (III.iv.133-4).

Preternatural knowledge means control, domination; it is an intrusive, penetrating activity, a kind of masculine sexual equivalent. His wife's invitation to literal sexual consummation pales before the intensity of Macbeth's psychic need. The ravenous desire to control futurity, to reinforce his invincible image, drives him to move actively towards these representatives of the inhuman realm. By the end of this scene Macbeth has taken a significant step away from his own humanity: he is content that his actions be mechanical, unreflective, untouched by considerations of conscience. "Strange things I have in head," he boasts, "that will to hand, / Which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd" (III.iv.138-9).

In the human realm knowledge of events is the male prerogative; in the preternatural realm, on the contrary, it belongs to the sexually ambiguous Weird Sisters. In a perverse way they suggest a debased image of the hermaphroditic figure, a figure to whom sexual stereotypes are simply not applicable. Can we say that the inhuman, as represented by these creatures, is also the sexually undifferentiated? They are mysterious and powerful not only because of their knowledge but also because of the spontaneity and unpredictability that freedom from stereotypes allows. They come and go as they please; they will not be interrogated or commanded. Macbeth tells his wife: "When I burn'd in desire to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanish'd" (I.v.4-5).

When the Weird Sisters first encounter Macbeth they present him with a vision of his destiny that tempts him to create his own future through an action that can only be performed if he accepts a false stereotype of manliness: murder becomes the means he must use to create actively his destiny and he can only commit murder by linking the image of the murderer to that of the male. They show him what he could be. The question is: will he aggressively create himself or will he passively let events work their way? At first he
resolves: "If chance will have me king, why, chance / May crown me without my stir" (I.iv.143-4). Yet Macbeth has always shaped his life by will and action; he is by nature one who takes the significance of his existence into his own hands. Finally, he rejects passivity and takes control of his future. In his second encounter with the Weird Sisters he demands that the prophecies be presented by the "masters," presumably demons who assume the shapes of the apparitions. These prophecies enkindle in him the false certainty that he can eliminate limitations, restrictions, and ultimately the threat of his own mortality if only he intensifies the male stereotype: "Be bloody, bold and resolute"; "belion-mettled and proud" (Iv.i.79;90). The promise of security is his greatest enemy because it blinds him to the truth of his contingent status as a human being. If no man of woman born shall harm Macbeth, then he has achieved a godlike invulnerability which allows him to act without restraint or fear: "the very firstlings of my heart shall be the firstlings of my hand" (IV.i. 147-8). It is this very type of action, however, that dooms him to destruction under the sword of Macduff.

As Macbeth strives to emulate "marble-wholeness," his wife splits apart psychically under the pressure of his indifference and her remorse. Her agony of spirit and deep dividedness burst forth without her conscious awareness in the sleep-walking scene. On the one hand she exhibits fearless determination: "What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?" (V.i.36). She uses the plural "our" when she speaks of power, indicating that it had been her desire and intent to share, a fantasy she can only live out in nightmares. On the other hand, she exhibits a horror of the deeds and their consequences: "What, will these hands ne'er be clean?" (V.i.42). Significantly, in her sleep she relives the mastery over her husband she no longer has: "Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier and afeard?" (V.i.36). Her final words, however, are a pathetic expression of her need for comfort and union: "come, give me your hand … To bed, to bed, to bed" (V.i.68). As in the early scenes of the play, she both despises her husband's "weakness" and desires to lean on him for support.

As Lady Macbeth collapses under the onslaught of an infected mind, Macbeth succumbs to the assaults of external foes. When Seyton brings his word that the queen is dead, his response is terse and ambiguous: "She should have died hereafter" (V.v.17). Significantly, Lady Macbeth's demise is announced by the wailing of her women. At the end of the play she is completely removed from the masculine world she so desperately wanted to enter and which so effectively has excluded her. A victim of her "thick-coming fancies," she, like her husband, loses touch with her humanity except within the ambiance of a dream world.

In the battle scenes at the end of the play, Macbeth, who channeled all his energies into being a "man," is visually and linguistically surrounded by boys until his final encounter with Macduff, the man of no woman born. It seems as though the feminine principle, removed by the sequestration and suicide of Lady Macbeth, transfers itself to the persons of these young males whom Macbeth considers inferior to himself. He disparagingly refers to Malcolm as a "boy"; he bullies Seyton, calling him "lily-liver'd boy"; and when young Siward challenges him to combat, he can hardly condescend to battle such an adversary. Although Macbeth seems invincible on the battlefield, we must remember that his "valor" is being exercised upon males unequal to him in strength and experience. In terms of courage, and according to the laws of Macbeth's society, young Siward does prove himself a man by paying "a soldier's debt"; in his case, manliness does not confer invulnerability. It is, rather, a willingness to confront death and take the consequences:

He only liv'd but till he was a man;
The which no sooner had his prowess confirm'd,
In the unshrinking station where he fought,
But like a man he died.

(V. ix.6-9)

Siward achieves a form of manhood, but the structure of the play demonstrates the limitations of the definition set forth in the eulogy.
During the final action, the very humanity that Macbeth has tried so hard to escape forces itself upon his consciousness. He feels acutely his alienation from human society:

… my way of life  
Is fall’n into the sere, the yellow leaf;  
And that which should accompany old age,  
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,  
I must not look to have.  

(V.iii.22-6)

A strange remorse afflicts him when he confronts Macduff:

Of all men else I have avoided thee:  
But get thee back, my soul is too much charg’d  
With blood of thine already.  

(V.viii.2-4)

He sees with tragic clarity that in having striven to become more than a man he has become less than one: "bear-like I must fight the course" (V.vii.2). Deprived of preternatural assurance by Macduff's revelation, Macbeth begins to "pull in resolution," suddenly losing that false valor created by the illusion of his own immortality. He briefly falters, and in that faltering, an echo of his former martial courage is heard once more. It is as though Shakespeare forces us to remember Macbeth as the warrior-hero whose true valor is the emblem of his manhood. Threatened with humiliating captivity, Macbeth refuses to yield; like young Siward, he fights on, knowing he is doomed.

At the end of the play the action of the opening scenes finds remarkable parallels, indicating society's continued acceptance of the values and stereotypes that paradoxically both threaten it and guarantee its continuation. The false claimant to the throne is destroyed by superior force, this time embodied in Macduff, who, ironically, performs the same task that had previously been Macbeth's. He walks on stage with Macbeth's severed head, a brutal gesture that recalls Macbeth's own ruthless execution of Macdonwald. The same emphasis on repression of pain and tender feeling, the same equation of soldierly valor and manhood are reiterated in the discussion of young Siward's death. Malcolm, a subdued, more Machiavellian version of Duncan, distributes thanks and rewards using the same imagery of planting that his father before him had used, but unlike the former king's, Malcolm's thanks are brief and measured, his tears merely promised. The warm, golden blood of Duncan shows colder, less bright, in his son. The prince, in a performance convincing enough to have deceived Macduff, claimed that he could, had he the power, "pour the sweet milk of concord into Hell" (IV.iii.97). Now that he is king, there is no guarantee that he, like Macbeth, could not be seduced into actually carrying out that claim. Society has not changed; it has merely eliminated two extremists who pushed the stereotype of manliness beyond the limits it was established to serve.

The verdicts levelled against Macbeth and his wife by their society, "butcher," and "fiend-like Queen" do partial justice, if that, to the richness of their characters or the universal dimensions of the seductions to which they are exposed and to which they succumb. The tension which raises them to the level of tragedy in the eyes of the audience is created by the conflict between the roles they think they must play to actualize the self and achieve their destiny and the limits imposed by both nature and society. On the one hand, there is the ancient temptation: "ye shall be as gods"; on the other, there is the profound awareness (especially on Macbeth's part) of the inviolable limits which keep men human. As Macbeth accepts a false masculinity that simultaneously fosters the illusion of his godlike power and diminishes his total human development, he is alienated from the very society that inculcates the stereotype. Although Lady Macbeth strives to share in the male world by consciously renouncing her femininity, neither she nor we are allowed to forget that "little hand" that cannot, finally, wield the knife. As his "dearest partner" she was to have shared in the "golden round" and the
"greatness promised"; instead, she shares only in the dehumanization and nothingness Macbeth faces as his end.

**Macbeth (Vol. 29): Further Reading**


Contends that *Macbeth* "as a text to be interpreted by readers provides a critique of the play as a script—that is, as the basis of performance."


Compares and contrasts *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*; contends that *Macbeth* can be understood as "a tragedy about the nature of tragedy" and examines the psychological, social, and political ramifications of Macbeth's violence.


Employs a Jungian taxonomy to describe Macbeth and Lady Macbeth with regard to their tendencies toward introversion and extroversion.


Analyzes Shakespeare's use of such devices as rhyme, repetition, alliteration, and assonance to argue that *Macbeth* is a "musical" play.


Proposes that *Macbeth* is rife with Shakespeare's reflections on the transference of the English throne from Elizabeth to James.


Argues that *Macbeth* explores the relationship between power and authority against a supernatural background that underlies the entire play.


Presents a general discussion of *Macbeth*, covering such subjects as free will, Shakespeare's wordplay, and the play's imagery.

Analyzes the "world" of Macbeth, dividing it into four parts: the physical, the psychological, the political, and the moral.


Explores general issues of language and imagery, examines Macbeth scene by scene, and compares the play to other tragedies by Shakespeare and other dramatists.


Compares Macbeth to Aeschylus' Oresteia, insisting that Macbeth is "Shakespeare's most Aeschylean tragedy."


Examines Shakespeare's ambivalence toward monarchical rule in Macbeth, exploring the possible influence of Buchanan to counteract the traditional Jamesian interpretation.


Examines Macbeth and Doctor Faustus in light of the Elizabethan (Protestant) conception of damnation.


Uses Macbeth to investigate the sixteenth-century conception of murder.


Investigates Macbeth's characters and their relationships according to a series of geometrical schematics that incorporate psychoanalytic perspectives.


Insists that Macbeth distorts the distinction between language and action, developing "a magical partnership" in which thoughts, prayers, and invocations "move all too smoothly into deed and actuality."

Macbeth (Vol. 44): Introduction

Macbeth

From the 1700s to the present, critics have praised the artistic coherence of Macbeth and the intense economy of its dramatic action. Earlier commentators as well as contemporary critics have frequently remarked on the play's vivid depiction of treachery and bloodshed, its nightmarish atmosphere, the exploration of the issue of
free will versus fate, and the enigmatic nature of its hero. In the late twentieth century, however, there has been a shifting and complex response to the play and its chief protagonist. Although scholars continue to evaluate its relationship to the traditional medieval morality plays as well as its treatment of dynastic issues, they are no longer inclined to view *Macbeth* as a simplistic allegory of good versus evil or royalist propaganda vindicating the monarchy of James I. There is currently a sharp division among commentators on the question of whether Macbeth is a sympathetic figure with whom audiences and readers can identify, as they do with Lear, Hamlet, and Othello, or whether Macbeth is an egotistical and unadmirable character. Nevertheless, critics generally agree that Macbeth dominates the play in a way that is unique among Shakespeare's tragic heroes.

Late twentieth-century commentary on *Macbeth* frequently focuses on its principal character—his struggles with his conscience, his descent into corruption, and whether his fate is predestined. Dieter Mehl (1983) has centered his wide-ranging discussion of the play on Macbeth's agonizing internal conflicts and the stages of his moral corruption, contending that Shakespeare depicts his protagonist as an inherently good man who only succumbs to temptation after a harrowing struggle with his conscience. In Mehl's judgment, the nature of evil—and its hold over individual characters—is the essential issue of *Macbeth*. Similarly, R. A. Foakes (1996) has described the play as Shakespeare's most penetrating analysis of the concept of evil. Foakes regards Macbeth as an essentially moral man who, because of his wife's bullying and his own ambition, fatally compromises his gentler instincts and destroys his own humanity, ending up a victim as well as a villain.

Many recent commentators have discussed the question of whether the term "tragic hero" is appropriate for a dramatic protagonist who devolves into a murderous tyrant. In the context of these discussions, they have examined the means by which audiences and readers are led to identify with Macbeth, to sympathize with his fate, and to some degree even admire him. Robert B. Heilman (1966) has examined the issue of the hero's problematic stature, arguing that because we are induced to share Macbeth's perspective on events, his emotional turmoil, and his terrible anxieties, we find ourselves empathizing with him and achieving an expanded vision of human nature and of ourselves. From Heilman's perspective, Macbeth is no ordinary villain but rather a man with an exceptional capacity to feel, imagine, and suffer, and thus he evokes our pity and understanding. Arthur Kirsch (1984) also has focused on Macbeth's ambitious nature, emphasizing the emptiness of his desires and the insatiability of his aspirations. The critic characterizes Macbeth as the most egotistical of Shakespeare's tragic heroes and suggests that it is extremely difficult either to sympathize with him or to admire him. By contrast, Michael Davis (1979) has interpreted *Macbeth* as a tragedy of courage, in which Shakespeare explores the nature of manliness and the implications of defining oneself solely in terms of valor. Davis proposes that Macbeth's unquenchable desire to master his fate and overcome all obstacles must inevitably lead either to defeat—or to emptiness—if he conquers all his foes. In Davis's judgment, when Macbeth places his future in the hands of the witches, he relinquishes his autonomy and becomes unmanned.

Indeed, emasculation is one of Macbeth's principal anxieties, according to psychoanalytic criticism. Other subconscious tensions discovered in the play by commentators using this approach include incestuous or oedipal fears. *Macbeth* has been the subject of a large number of psychoanalytic interpretations. Over the last thirty years, traditional Freudian or oedipal readings of the play have been augmented by many commentators. Robert N. Watson (1984), for example, has argued that Shakespeare portrays Macbeth's crimes as symbolic infringements on the normal cycles of procreation and generation. He asserts that Macbeth's transgressions should be seen as crimes rooted in ambition rather than sexual perversion. In another departure from conventional Freudian interpretations, H. R. Coursen (1985) has offered a Jungian approach to the relationship between Macbeth and his wife. From this perspective, the couple is seen as unconsciously exchanging masculine and feminine capacities as Macbeth allows his inherent proclivity toward introversion and human kindness to be dominated by his wife's dynamic and aggressive temperament. Kay Stockholder (1987) also has evaluated the nature of the relation between the play's chief protagonists. She argues that they are bound together by a love that associates passion with violence rather than tenderness and, further, that their intimacy dissipates after Duncan's murder because henceforth Macbeth becomes the unimaginative man.
of action his wife initially believed him to be. In the critic's judgment, the play's dream-like quality is reflected in the relationship between the Macbeths as well as by the witches, who help position the play on the boundaries between the dreaming and waking states.

Supernatural elements in Macbeth are part of the texture of discussions of religious and theological issues in the play, and the Weird Sisters are frequently linked to the possibility of providential or deterministic interpretations. Critics who have recently analyzed the play in these terms generally allude to its ambiguous or paradoxical treatment of theological issues and deny any clear-cut resolution of such questions. For example, Howard Felperin (1975) has examined the play in terms of its relation to orthodox Christian drama, pointing out ways in which it promotes traditional doctrines but subverts or revises them as well. Although the play demystifies sacred myths and symbols, the critic asserts, it shows these forms as essential to social stability and legitimate hierarchy. Charles Moseley (1988) has viewed Macbeth as an inherently religious play, one that is chiefly concerned with the conflict between good and evil in the soul of its protagonist. Moseley maintains that Macbeth is not forced to do anything: although the witches prey on his ambition, it is ultimately his refusal to express contrition for his wickedness that seals his fate. Both James L. o'Rourke (1993) and Susan Snyder (1994) have also questioned providential readings of the play, employing different approaches but reaching similar conclusions. In o'Rourke's opinion, Macbeth portrays a world that is deeply subversive of Christian metaphysics—one in which the dramatic action is determined neither by divine providence nor by human will, but instead by an irrational sequence of action and consequence. The critic regards the play as profoundly pessimistic, governed from beginning to end by an ironic perspective that obscures the distinction between good and evil. Snyder similarly has found the world of Macbeth morally unstable and the boundary between supernatural and human causality indeterminate. In her judgment, the play provides no answers to the questions it raises about the relative culpability of the witches'equivocal predictions and Macbeth's potential to commit the murder they seem to suggest to him. Indeed, she concludes, the prophecies of the Weird Sisters remain as inscrutable as Macbeth's motivations.

Macbeth (Vol. 44): Overviews

Harry Levin (essay date 1982)


[In the following essay, Levin examines the thematic significance of the Porter's scene and Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking episode. In the former, he discerns resonances of hell and damnation, as well as an iteration of the witches'equivocal oracles; the latter scene, he suggests, epitomizes the nightmarish quality of Macbeth and repeats in miniature the play's alternating arguments regarding free will and fate.]

Hamlet without the Prince would still be more of a spectacle than Macbeth without the Thane of Glamis. Though the latter is not introspective by nature, his soliloquizing is central to the play, as he considers intentions, casts suspicions, registers hallucinations, coerces his conscience, balances hope against fear, and gives thought to the unspeakable—all this while sustaining the most energetic role in the most intense of Shakespeare's plays. Macbeth is the fastest of them, as Coleridge pointed out, while Hamlet, at almost twice its length, is the slowest. Thus the uncut Hamlet has plenty of room for other well-defined characters and for highly elaborated subplots. Whereas Macbeth, which has come down to us in a version stripped for action, concentrates more heavily upon the protagonist. He speaks over thirty per cent of the lines; an overwhelming proportion of the rest bear reference to him; and Lady Macbeth has about eleven per cent, all of them referring to him directly or indirectly. Most of the other parts get flattened in this process, so that his may stand out in bold relief. Otherwise, as Dr. Johnson commented, there is "no nice discrimination of character." As Macbeth successively murders Duncan, Banquo, and Lady Macduff with her children, a single line of antagonism
builds up through Malcolm and Fleance to the effectual revenger, Macduff. There is evidence, in the original text and in the subsequent stage-history, to show that the grim spareness of the plot was eked out by additional grotesqueries on the part of the Witches.

I make this preliminary obeisance to the centrality of the hero-villain because it is not to him that I shall be calling your attention, though it should be evident already that he will be reflected upon by my sidelights. In skipping over the poetry of his speeches or the moral and psychological dimensions of character, I feel somewhat like the visitor to a Gothic edifice whose exclusive focus is devoted to a gargoyle here and there. I should not be doing so if the monument as a whole were less memorably familiar than it is, or if the artistic coherence of a masterpiece did not so frequently reveal itself through the scrutiny of an incidental detail. My two short texts are quite unevenly matched, though not disconnected in the long run. One of them, the Porter's Scene, has been regarded more often than not as a mere excrescence or intrusion. The other, the Sleepwalking Scene, has become one of the high spots in the repertory as a set piece for distinguished actresses. The lowest common denominator between them is that both have been written in prose. Apart from more functional purposes, such as documents and announcements, Shakespeare makes use of prose to convey an effect of what Brian Vickers terms "otherness," a different mode of diction from the norm. To cite the clearest instance, Hamlet's normal personality is expressed in blank verse; he falls into prose when he puts on his "antic disposition." This combines, as do the fools' roles, the two major uses of Shakespeare's non-metrical speech: on the one hand, comedy, low life, oftentimes both; on the other, the language of psychic disturbance.

Our two scenes are enacted in these two modes respectively. But, before we turn to them, let us take a very brief glance at the outdoor stage of the Shakespearean playhouse. On that subject there has been an infinite deal of specific conjecture over a poor halfpennyworth of reliable documentation, and many of those conjectures have disagreed with one another. Over its most general features, however, there is rough agreement, and that is all we need here. We know that its large jutting platform had a roof supported by two pillars downstage; one of which might conveniently have served as the tree where Orlando hangs his verses in As You Like It. We are also aware of an acting space "aloft" at stage rear, whence Juliet or Prospero could have looked down. As for the curtained space beneath, that remains an area of veiled uncertainty. Yet the back wall of the tiring-house had to include an outside doorway big enough to accommodate the inflow and outflow of sizable properties, and possibly to present a more or less literal gate upon due occasion. Hence it is not difficult to conceive of the stage as the courtyard of a castle, into which outsiders would arrive, and off of which branched chambers for the guests, who might hurriedly rush out from them if aroused by some emergency. Moreover, the surrounding auditorium, open to the skies and rising in three tiers of galleries, might itself have presented a kind of courtyard. Not that this arrangement was representational. It was the stylization of the theatrical arena that made possible its scope and adaptability.

Much depended, of course, upon the convention of verbal scenery. When the aged, gracious, and serene King Duncan appears at the gate of Glamis Castle, his introductory words sketch the setting and suggest the atmosphere:

This castle hath a pleasant seat, the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses.

(I, vi, 1-3)

The description is amplified by Banquo with his mention of "the temple-haunting marlet," the bird whose presence almost seems to consecrate a church, one of the succession of birds benign and malign whose auspices are continually invoked. The description of the marlet's "procreant cradle" (8)—and procreation is one of the points at issue throughout—assures us that "the heaven's breath / Smells wooingly here" (5,6). And Banquo completes the stage-design:
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observ'd
The air is delicate.

(9, 10)

Knowing what we have been informed with regard to Duncan's reception, and what he is so poignantly unaware of, we may well find it a delicate situation. Stressing its contrast to the episodes that precede and follow it, Sir Joshua Reynolds called it "a striking instance of what in painting is termed repose." Repose—or rather, the absence of it—is fated to become a major theme of the tragedy. It will mean not rest but restlessness for Macbeth, when Duncan all too soon is accorded his last repose. Are we not much nearer, at this point, to the fumes of hell than to the heaven's breath? Macbeth, as he will recognize in a soliloquy, "should gainst his murtherer shut the door," rather than hypocritically welcoming Duncan in order to murder him (I, vii, 15). Duncan has been a ruler who exemplified royalty, a guest who deserved hospitality, and a man of many virtues who has commanded respect, as Macbeth himself acknowledges. The scene is set for the crimes and their consequences by this two-faced welcome into the courtyard of Macbeth's castle.

By the end of the incident-crowded First Act, in spite of his hesitant asides and soliloquies, everything has fallen into place for the consummation of the Witches' cackling prophecies. The Second Act begins ominously with Banquo's muted misgivings; he supplicates the "merciful powers"—who seem less responsive than those darker spirits addressed by Lady Macbeth—to restrain in him "the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose," and retires after Macbeth has wished him "Good repose" (II, i, 7-9, 29). This exchange would seem to occur in the courtyard, which becomes the base of operations for the murder. The first scene culminates in the vision of the dagger, hypnotically drawing Macbeth to the door of Duncan's quarters. Leaving them after the deed, as he recounts to his wife in the second scene, he has experienced another hallucination: the voice that cried "Sleep no more!" (II, ii, 32). Meanwhile Lady Macbeth has soliloquized, fortified with drink, and he has cried out offstage at the fatal instant. One residual touch of humanity, the memory of her own father, has inhibited her from killing the king herself; but she is Amazonian enough, taking the bloody daggers from her badly shaken husband with a crude and cruel joke (the pun on "gild" and "guilt"), to reenter the death chamber and plant them upon the sleeping grooms (II, ii, 53-54). It is then that the tensely whispered colloquies between the guilty couple are suddenly interrupted by that most portentous of sound effects: the knocking at the gate.

This is the point of departure for a well-known essay by Thomas De Quincey, who argues, rather overingeniously, that the interruption helps to restore normality, calming the excited sensibilities of the spectator. "The reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again," De Quincey concludes, "the reestablishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them." Here De Quincey, who elsewhere styled himself "a connoisseur of murder," seems to have got his proportions wrong. Surely it is the Porter's Scene that forms a parenthesis in an increasingly awful train of events. "Every noise appalls me," Macbeth has said (II, ii, 55). For him—and for us as well—the knock reverberates with the menace of retribution, like the opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. It heralds no resumption of diurnal business as usual. Let us bear in mind that the knocker is to be the avenger, the victim who will have suffered most from the tyrant's cruelty. Macduff's quarrel with Macbeth, according to Holinshed's chronicle, first arose because the Thane of Fife did not fully participate when commanded by the King of Scotland to help him build the new castle at Dunsinane. It is surprising that Shakespeare did not utilize that hint of motivation; possibly he did, and the scene was among those lost through the rigors of cutting. It would have added another turn of the screw to Macbeth's seizure of Macduff's castle at Fife and the domestic massacre therein.

As for Dunsinane Castle, it is ironic that Macbeth should count upon its strength and that it should be so easily surrendered, "gently rend'red," after a few alarums and excursions (V, vii, 24). It comes as a final reversal of
the natural order that he, besieged and bound in, should be assaulted and overcome by what appears to be a
walking forest. So, in the earlier scenes, the manifest presumption is that the pleasantly situated Glamis Castle
would be a haven and a sanctuary, associated with temples by Macbeth as well as Banquo. Rapidly it proves
to be the opposite for its guests, whereas those menacing thumps at the gateway announce the arrival not of a
dangerous enemy but of their predestined ally. Despite his sacrifice and suffering, his quasi-miraculous birth,
and his intervention on the side of the angels, I shall refrain from presenting Macduff as a Christ-figure. There
are altogether too many of these in current literary criticism—many more, I fear, than exist in real life. Yet it
is enlightening to consider the suggested analogy between this episode and that pageant in the mystery cycles
which dramatizes the Harrowing of Hell. Some of those old guild-plays were still being acted during
Shakespeare's bodyhood; nearby Coventry was a center for them; and we meet with occasional allusions to
them in Shakespeare's plays, notably to Herod whose furious ranting had made him a popular byword.
Without the Slaughter of the Innocents, over which he presided, the horrendous slaughter at Macduff's castle
would have been unthinkable. Many later audiences, which might have flinched, have been spared it.

When Jesus stands before the gates of hell, in the Wake-field cycle, his way is barred by a gatekeeper
suggestively named Rybald, who tells his fellow devil Beelzebub to tie up those souls which are about to be
delivered: "how, belsabub! bynde thse boys, / sich harow was never hard in hell." The command of Jesus that
the gates be opened takes the form of a Latin cadence from the liturgy, *Attollite portas*. . . . This, in turn, is
based upon the vulgate phrasing of the Twenty-fourth Psalm: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; even lift them
up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in." The liturgical Latin echoes the rite of Palm
Sunday celebrating Christ's entrance into Jerusalem. It was also chanted before the portals of a church during
the ceremonies of consecration. In the mystery, Jesus enters hell to debate with Satan and ends by rescuing
therefrom various worthies out of the Old Testament. That is the typological situation which prefigured
Shakespeare's comic gag. We must now turn back to his dilatory Porter, after having kept the visitor waiting
outside longer than the Porter will. Obviously the action is continuous between Scenes Two and Three, with
the repeated knocking to mark the continuity. "Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!" is the
exit line (II, ii, 71). Macbeth, unnerved, is guided to their chamber by his wife, as he will be again in the
Banquet Scene, and as she will imagine in the Sleepwalking Scene. There should be a minute when the stage
is bare, and the only drama is the knocking.

But it will take a longer interval for the couple to wash off the blood and change into night attire. This is the
theatrical necessity that provides the Porter with his cue and one of the troupe's comedians with a small part.
Shakespeare's clowns tend to be more stylized than his other characters, most specifically the fools created by
Robert Armin, and probably to reflect the personal style of certain actors. Will Kemp, who preceded Armin as
principal comedian, seems to have specialized in voluble servants. It may well have been Kemp who created
the rather similar roles of Launce in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and Launcelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of
Venice*. Each of these has his characteristic routine: a monologue which becomes a dialogue as the speaker
addresses himself to imagined interlocutors. Gobbo's is especially apropos, since it pits his conscience against
the fiend. Shakespeare did not abandon that vein after Kemp left the company; indeed he brought it to its
highest pitch of development in Falstaff's catechism on honor. The Porter's little act is pitched at a much lower
level, yet it can be better understood in the light of such parallels. The sleepy Porter stumbles in, bearing the
standard attributes of his office, a lantern and some keys. He is not drunk now; but, like others in the castle, he
has been carousing late; and his fantasy may be inspired by the penitential mood of the morning after. "If a
man were Porter of Hell Gate"—that is the hypothesis on which he is ready to act—"he should have old
turning the key"—he should have to admit innumerable sinners (II, iii, 1-3).

An audience acquainted with Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* would not have to be reminded that the hellmouth
had figured in the mysteries. And the dramatist who had conceived the Brothel Scene in *Othello* had
envisioned a character, namely Emilia, who could be accused of keeping—as the opposite number of Saint
Peter—"the gate of hell" (IV, ii, 92). The Porter assumes that stance by choice, asking himself: "Who's there,
i'th' name of Belzebub?" (3-4). He answers himself by admitting three social offenders. It has been his plan, he
then confides, to have passed in review "all professions," doubtless with an appropriately satirical comment on each (18). But, despite the histrionic pretence that hellfire is roaring away, the Porter's teeth are chattering in the chill of early morning: "this place is too cold for hell" (16-17). Neither the time-serving farmer nor the hose-stealing tailor seems as pertinent a wrongdoer as the equivocator, "who could not equivocate to heaven" (10-11). Here the editors digress to inform us about the trial and execution of Henry Garnet, Superior of the Jesuit Order, in 1606. The topical allusion is helpful, insofar as it indicates how the word came to be in the air; and Garnet's casuistry had to do with treason and attempted regicide, the notorious Gunpowder Plot. But Macbeth is not exactly a satire on the Jesuits. Maeterlinck, in his translation, renders "equivocator" by "jésuite" because there is no cognate French equivalent. The thematic significance of the Porter's speech lies in its anticipation of the oracles ("These juggling fiends"), which turn out to be true in an unanticipated sense: "th'equivocation of the fiend" (V, viii, 19; V, v, 42).

The Porter, who has been parrying the knocks by echoing them, finally shuffles to the gate, lets in Macduff and Lenox, and stands by for his tip: "I pray you remember the porter" (20-21). Drink, which has inebriated the grooms and emboldened Lady Macbeth, is his poor excuse for tardiness. The after-effects of drinking are the subject of his vulgar and not very funny riddle: "nose-painting, sleep, and urine" (28). Then, licensed perhaps by the precedent of the devil-porter Rybald, he moves on to the equivocal subject of lechery. If drink provokes the desire but takes away the performance, it is a paradigm for Macbeth's ambition. For, as Lady Macbeth will realize: "Nought's had, all's spent, / Where our desire is got without content" (III, ii, 4-5). When liquor is declared to be "an equivocator with lechery," that equivocation is demonstrated by the give-and-take of the Porter's rhythms: "it makes him, and it mars him; it sets him on, and it takes him off; it persuades him, and disheartens him; makes him stand to, and not stand to; in conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and giving him the lie, leaves him" (II, iii, 32-36). Each of these paired clauses, here again, links a false promise with a defeated expectation, expiring into drunken slumber after a moment of disappointed potency. The see-saw of the cadencing is as much of a prophecy as the Witches'couplets, and it has the advantage of pointing unequivocally toward the dénouement. The repartee trails off, after a lame pun about lying, with the reentrance of Macbeth, for which the Porter has been gaining time by going through his turn.

That turn has regularly been an object of expurgation, both in the theater and in print. I am not digressive if I recall that, when I wrote the introduction to a schooledition several years ago, the publishers wanted to leave out the Porter's ribaldry. I insisted upon an unbowdlerized text; but their apprehensions were commercially warranted; the textbook, though it is in a well-known series, has hardly circulated at all. Thousands of adolescents have been saved from the hazards of contemplating alcoholism, sex, and micturition. On a higher critical plane—some would say the highest—Coleridge was so nauseated by the whole scene that he ruled it out of the canon, declaring that it had been "written for the mob by another hand." The sentence about "the primrose way to th'everlasting bonfire," Coleridge conceded, had a Shakespearean ring (II, iii, 19). Without pausing to wonder whether it might have been echoed from Hamlet, he characteristically assumed that Shakespeare himself had interpolated it within the interpolation of his unknown collaborator. This enabled him to beg the question with Coleridgean logic and to comment further on "the entire absence of comedy, nay, even of irony . . . in Macbeth." Wholly apart from the comedy or the authenticity of the Porter Scene, it must strike us as singularly obtuse to overlook the fundamental ironies of the play: its ambiguous predictions, its self-destructive misdeeds. It could be urged, in Coleridge's defense, that the concept of dramatic irony had not yet been formulated. Kierkegaard's thesis on it was published in 1840, having been anticipated by Connop Thirlwall just a few years before.

Coleridge's rejection is sustained by another high literary authority. In Schiller's German adaptation, the Porter is high-minded and cold sober. He has stayed awake to keep guard over the King, and therefore over all Scotland, as he tells Macbeth in an ambitious jest. Instead of masquerading as an infernal gatekeeper, he has sung a pious hymn to the sunrise and has ignored the knocking in order to finish his Morgenlied. Yet, for a century now, the current of opinion has run the other way; commentators have held, with J. W. Hales, that Shakespeare's Porter was authentic and by no means inappropriate. Robert Browning heartily agreed, and
Bishop Wordsworth even allowed that the scene could be read with edification. So it should be, given its eschatological overtones. We have long discarded the neo-classical inhibitions regarding the intermixture of tragic and comic elements. We have learned, above all from Lear's Fool, that the comic can intensify the tragic, rather than simply offer itself as relief. Those "secret, black, and midnight hags," the Witches, who for Holinshed were goddesses of destiny, come as close as anything in Shakespeare to the chorus of Greek tragedy (IV, i, 48). But their outlandish imminence seems elusive and amoral because of their mysterious connection with the machinery of fate. The Porter's role is grotesquely choric in another sense. Like the Gardener in Richard II, he stands there to point the moral, to act out the object-lesson. This castle, far from reaching up toward heaven, is located at the brink of hell. Even now its lord has damned himself eternally.

Damnation is portended by the curse of sleeplessness, which has been foreshadowed among the spells that the First Witch proposed to cast upon the sea-captain: "Sleep shall neither night nor day / Hang upon his penthouse lid" (I, iii, 19-20). No sooner has the King been murdered than Macbeth hears the voice crying "Sleep no more!" and begins to extoll the blessing he has forfeited. The word itself is sounded thirty-two times, more than in any other play of Shakespeare's. Repeatedly sleep is compared with death. Almost enviously, after complaining of the "terrible dreams" that afflict him nightly, Macbeth evokes the buried Duncan: "After life's fitful fever he sleeps well" (III, ii, 18, 23). When he breaks down at the Banquet Scene before the apparition of Banquo's ghost, it is Lady Macbeth who assumes command, discharges the guests, and leads her husband off to bed with the soothing words: "You lack the season of all natures, sleep" (III, iv, 140). It should be noted that she does not see the ghost or hear the voice, and that she skeptically dismisses the air Drawn dagger as a subjective phenomenon: "the very painting of your fear" (III, iv, 60). Unlike Macbeth, she has no intercourse with the supernatural forces. To be sure, she has called upon the spirits to unsex her, fearing lest she be deterred from murder by the milk—the feminine attribute—of human kindness. And from the outset it is he, not she, who feels and expresses that remorse she has steeled herself against, those "compunctious visitings of nature" (I, v, 45). When they ultimately overtake her, his insomnia will have its counterpart in her somnambulism.

In keeping with her aloofness from supernaturalism, Shakespeare's treatment of her affliction seems so naturalistic that it is now and then cited among the clinical cases in abnormal psychology. According to the seventeenth-century frame of reference, she may show the symptoms of melancholia or—to invoke theological concepts that still can grip the audiences of films—demonic possession. Psychoanalysis tends to diagnose her malady as a manifestation of hysteria, which compels her to dramatize her anxiety instead of dreaming about it, to reenact the pattern of behavior that she has tried so desperately to repress. Freud regarded this sleepwalker and her sleepless mate as "two disunited parts of a single psychical individuality," together subsuming the possibilities of reaction to the crime, and underlined the transference from his response to hers, from his hallucinations to her mental disorder. In more social terms, the closeness of their complementary relationship seems strongly reinforced by the sexual bond between them. Three of the exit-lines emphasize their going to bed together. Caroline Spurgeon and other interpreters of Shakespeare's imagery have noticed that the most recurrent metaphor in the play has to do with dressing and undressing, transposed sometimes into arming and disarming or crowning and uncrowning. The sense of intimacy is enhanced by the recollection that the nightgowns mentioned are dressing-gowns, that under the bedclothes no clothing of any sort was worn in that day; and nakedness exposed is one of the other themes (a recent film has welcomed the opportunity for presenting a heroine in the nude). Lady Macbeth, as M. C. Bradbrook has observed, must have been a siren as well as a fury.

Inquiries into her motives have dwelt upon her childlessness, after having borne a child who evidently died, and that frustration seems to have kindled Macbeth's hostility toward the families of Banquo and Macduff. Deprived of happy motherhood, she takes a somewhat maternal attitude toward her spouse, and she seeks a vicarious fulfillment in her ruthless ambitions for his career. Holinshed had stressed her single-minded goading-on of her husband, "burning in unquenchable desire to bear the name of a queen." She may be a "fiendlike queen" to Malcolm and other enemies, but the characterization is highly nuanced when we contrast
it with the termagant queens of Shakespeare's earliest histories (V, ix, 35). Criticism ranges all the way from Hazlitt ("a great bad woman whom we hate, but whom we fear more than we hate") to Coleridge ("a woman of a visionary and daydreaming turn of mind"). Coleridge had re-created Hamlet in his own image, after all, and his Lady Macbeth might pose as a model for Madame Bovary. The variance in interpretations extends from Lamartine's "perverted and passionate woman" to Tieck's emphasis on her conjugal tenderness, which provoked the mockery of Heine, who envisages her billing and cooing like a turtle dove. She may not be "such a dear" as Bernard Shaw discerned in Ellen Terry's portrayal; but she encompasses most of these images, inasmuch as Shakespeare clearly understood the ambivalence of aggression and sympathy in human beings. Her emotions and Macbeth's are timed to a different rhythm. As he hardens into a fighting posture, and his innate virility reasserts itself, she softens into fragile femininity, and her insecurities come to the surface of her breakdown.

Distraction of the mind is rendered by Shakespeare in a pithy, terse, staccato idiom which might not inappropriately be termed distracted prose. Madness, along with all the other moods of English tragedy, had originally been conveyed through blank verse, as when Titus Andronicus "runs lunatic." So it was in Kyd's operatic Spanish Tragedy, though the later and more sophisticated ragings of its hero would be added by another hand in prose. The innovation was Marlowe's: in the First Part of Tamburlaine the captive queen Zabina goes mad over the death of her consort Bajazet, and before her suicide gives utterance to a short prose sequence of broken thoughts. Her farewell line, "Make ready my coach . . . ," must have given Shakespeare a suggestion for Ophelia. He seized upon this technique and developed it to the point where it became, in the phrase of Laertes, "A document in madness, / Thoughts and remembrance fitted." Ophelia distributing flowers, like King Lear distributing weeds, obsessively renews the source of grief. Edgar in the guise of Tom o'Bedlam deliberately imitates such language as does Hamlet when he simulates insanity. Lear's Fool is exceptional, since he is both a jester and a natural; yet, in that dual role, he may be looked upon as a mediator between the comic and the distracted prose. And in King Lear as a whole, in the interrelationship between the Lear-Cordelia plot and the Gloucester-Edgar underplot, we have our most highly wrought example of the two plots running parallel. As a matter of dramaturgic tradition, that parallel tended in the direction of parody.

Thus, in the Second Shepherds'Play at Wakefield, the serious plot about the nativity is parodied by the sheep-stealing underplot, since the lamb is an emblem of Jesus. In the oldest English secular comedy, Fulgens and Lucre, while two suitors court the mistress, their respective servants court the maid—probably the most traditional of all comic situations, harking back as far as Aristophanes' Frogs. In Doctor Faustus the clowns burlesque the hero's conjurations by purloining his magical book and conjuring up a demon. This has its analogue in The Tempest, where the conspiracy against Prospero is burlesqued by the clownish complot. Having defended the essential seriousness of the Porter's Scene, I am not moving toward an argument that there is anything comic per se in the Sleepwalking Scene; but there is something distinctly parodic about the virtual repetition of a previous scene in such foreshortened and denatured form. Murder will out, as the old adage cautions; the modern detective story operates on the assumption that the murderer returns to the locality of the crime. Lady Macbeth, always brave and bold when her husband was present, must sleep alone when he departs for the battlefield. It is then that her suppressed compunction, her latent sense of guilt, wells up from the depths of her subconscious anguish. Under the cover of darkness and semi-consciousness, she must now reenact her part, going through the motions of that scene in the courtyard on the night of Duncan's assassination, and recapitulating the crucial stages of the entire experience.

When the late Tyrone Guthrie staged his production at the Old Vic, he directed his leading lady, Flora Robson, to reproduce the exact gesticulation of the murder scene. Such an effect could not have been achieved within the Piranesi-like setting designed by Gordon Craig, where the sleepwalking was supposed to take place on the steps of a sweeping spiral staircase. One of the most theatrical features of this episode, however it be played, lies in the choreographic opportunity that it offers to the actress and the director. At the Globe Playhouse the principal problem in staging would have been the glaring fact that plays were performed there in broad daylight. That was simply met by a convention, which has been uncovered through the researches of
W. J. Laurence. A special point was made of bringing out lanterns, tapers, or other lights, paradoxically enough, to indicate the darkness. But the lighting of the Sleepwalking Scene is not merely conventional. Lady Macbeth, we learn, can no longer abide the dark. "She has light by her continually," her Waiting Gentlewoman confides to the Doctor (V, i, 22-23). It is the candle she carries when she enters, no mere stage property either, throwing its beams like a good deed in a naughty world. Banquo, on a starless night, has referred metaphorically to the overclouded stars as extinguished candles. Macbeth, when the news of his wife's suicide is subsequently brought to him, will inveigh against the autumnal prospect of meaninglessness ahead, and the yesterdays behind that have "lighted fools / The way to dusty death" (V, v, 22-23). Life itself is the brief candle he would now blow out.

Lady Macbeth presumably carried her candle throughout the scene until the London appearance of Sarah Siddons in 1785. She was severely criticized for setting it down on a table, so that she could pantomime the gesture of rubbing her hands. Sheridan, then manager of the Drury Lane, told her: "It would be thought a presumptuous innovation." Man of the theater that he was, he congratulated her upon it afterwards. But many in the audience were put off by it, and even more by her costume. She was wearing white satin, traditionally reserved for mad scenes, and later on would shift to a shroud-like garment. Mrs. Siddons as Lady Macbeth became, by wide consent, the greatest English actress in her greatest role. Hence we have a fair amount of testimony about her performance. A statuesque figure whose rich voice ranged from melancholy to peevishness, subsiding at times into eager whispers, she was "tragedy personified" for Hazlitt, who reports that "all her gestures were involuntary and mechanical." More physically active than her candle-burdened predecessors, who seem to have mainly glided, she excelled particularly at stage-business. The hand-rubbing was accompanied by a gesture of ladling water out of an imaginary ewer. When she held up one hand, she made a face at the smell—a bit of business which Leigh Hunt considered "unrefined." Yet, after she had made her exit stalking backwards, one witness testified: "I swear that I smelt blood!" She herself has attested that, when as a girl of twenty she began to study the part, she was overcome by a paroxysm of terror.

Turning more directly to "this slumb'ry agitation," we are prepared for it by the expository conversation between the Gentlewoman and the Doctor (V, i, 11). Lady Macbeth's twenty lines will be punctuated by their whispering comments. It is clear that there have been earlier visitations, and that Lady Macbeth has engaged in writing during one of them; but what she spoke the Gentlewoman firmly refuses to disclose. The Doctor, who has been watching with her during the last two nights, has so far witnessed nothing. But, from the account, he knows what to expect: "A great perturbation in nature, to receive at once the benefit of sleep and do the effects of watching!" (9-11). Sleep seems scarcely a benefit under the circumstances, much as it may be longed for by the watchful, the ever-wakeful Macbeth; and, though Lady Macbeth is actually sleeping, she is not only reliving the guilty past but incriminating herself. When she appears, the antiphonal comment ("You see her eyes are open." / "Ay, but their sense is shut.") raises that same question of moral blindness which Shakespeare explored in King Lear (24-25). If she could feel that her hands were cleansed when she washed them, her compulsive gesture would be a ritual of purification. Yet Pilate, washing his hands before the multitude, has become an archetype of complicity. Her opening observation and exclamation ("Yet here's a spot" . . . "Out, damn'd spot!") is a confession that prolonged and repeated ablutions have failed to purge her sins (31, 35). She continues by imagining that she hears the clock strike two: it is time for the assassination. Her revulsion from it compresses into three words all the onus of the Porter's garrulous commentary: "Hell is murky" (36).

That sudden glimpse of the bottomless pit does not keep her from the sanguinary course she has been pursuing. But the grandiose iambic pentameter of her courtyard speeches, inspiring and rebuking her reluctant partner, has been contracted into a spasmodic series of curt, stark interjections, most of them monosyllabic. "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" (39-40). She had thought at least of her father, and had momentarily recoiled. Macbeth had feared that the deed might not "trammel up the consequence," might open the way for retributive counteraction, and indeed Duncan's blood has clamored for a terrible augmentation of bloodshed, has set off the chain-reaction of bloodfeuds involving
Banquo's progeny and Macduff's. Hitherto we had not been aware of Lady Macbeth's awareness of the latter, much less of how she might respond to his catastrophe. Her allusion to Lady Macduff seems reduced to the miniature scale of a nursery rhyme ("The Thane of Fife / had a wife"), but it culminates in the universal lamentation of _ubi est_: "Where is she now?" Then, more hand-washing, more conjugal reproach. Her listeners are realizing, more and more painfully, that they should not be listening; what she says should not be heard, should not have been spoken, should never have happened. "Here's the smell of the blood still" (50). The olfactory metaphor has a scriptural sanction, as Leigh Hunt should have remembered: evil was a stench in righteous nostrils, and the offence of Claudius smelled to heaven. The heartcry comes with the recognition that the smell of blood will be there forever: "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" (50-51).

She had been clear-headed, tough-minded, and matter-of-fact in tidying up after the murder: "A little water clears us of this deed." It was Macbeth, exhausted and conscience-stricken after his monstrous exertion, who had envisioned its ethical consequences in a hyperbolic comparison:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood} \\
\text{Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather} \\
\text{The multitudinous seas incarnadine.} \\
\text{Making the green one red} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(II, ii, 57-6)

Her hand is smaller than his, and so—relatively speaking—is her hyperbole. All the perfumes of Arabia, all the oilwells of Arabia, could not begin to fill the amplitude of the ocean, and the contrast is completed by the oceanic swell of his Latinate polysyllables. She has come to perceive, unwillingly and belatedly, that the stigmata are irremovable. He had perceived this at once and, moreover, reversed his magniloquent trope. Never can the bloodstain be cleansed away; on the contrary, it will pollute the world. No one can, as she advised in another context, "lave our honors" (III, ii, 33). The sound that voices this perception on her part ("O, O, O!") was more than a sign when Mrs. Siddons voiced it, we are told (V, i, 52). It was "a convulsive shudder—very horrible." The one-sided marital dialogue goes on, reverting to the tone of matter-of-factness. "Wash your hands, put on your nightgown, look not so pale" (62-63). If Duncan is in his grave, as Macbeth has mused, is not Banquo in a similar condition? Where is he now? Reminiscence here reverberates from the Banquet Scene: "I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on's grave" (63-64). These internalized anxieties that will not be so coolly exorcized are far more harrowing than the externalized ghosts that beset Richard III on the eve of battle. Having resumed his soldierly occupation and been reassured by the Witches' auguries, Macbeth has put fear behind him, whatever the other cares that are crowding upon him. It is therefore through Lady Macbeth that we apprehend the approach of nemesis.

And then her terminal speech: "To bed, to bed; there's knocking at the gate" (66-67). It is imaginary knocking; what we hear again is silence, a silence powerful enough to resurrect the encounter between those harbingers of revenge and damnation, Macduff and the Porter. Her fantasy concludes by repeating what we have already watched in both the Murder Scene and the Banquet Scene, when she led her faltering husband offstage. "Come, come, come, come, give me your hand" (67). Her next and penultimate remark harks back to the concatenation of earlier events. The First Witch, in her premonitory resentment against the sailor's wife, had promised him a swarm of nameless mischiefs (future tense): "I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do" (I, iii, 10). Macbeth's own ruminations at the edge of action had started from the premise (present tense, conditional and indicative): "If it were done, when'tis done, then'twere well / It were done quickly" (I, vii, 1-2). It was done quickly, whereupon Lady Macbeth sought to arrest his mounting disquietude with the flat affirmation (past, transitive): "What's done, is done" (III, ii, 12). Similar as it sounds, it was a far cry from her concluding negation, her fatalistic valediction to life: "What's done cannot be undone" (V, i, 68). This implies the wish that it had not been done, reinforces Macbeth's initial feeling that it need not be done, and equilibrates the play's dialectical
movement between free will and inevitability. The appeal, "To bed," is uttered five times. She moves off to the bedchamber they will never share again, as if she still were guiding her absent husband's steps and his bloodstained hand were still in hers.

The doctor, who has been taking notes, confesses himself to be baffled. The case is beyond his practise, it requires a divine rather than a physician. In the following scene he discusses it with Macbeth on a more or less psychiatric basis. Lady Macbeth is "Not so sick . . . / As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies, / That keep her from her rest" (V, iii, 37-39). The Doctor is not a psychiatrist; he cannot "minister to a mind diseas'd" (40). Nor has he a cure for Scotland's disease, when Macbeth rhetorically questions him. Here we catch the connection with the one scene that passes in England, where the dramatic values center on Macduff's reaction to his domestic tragedy. His interview with Malcolm is a test of loyalty, and the invented accusations that Malcolm levels against himself—that he would, for instance, "Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell"—are more applicable to Macbeth, whose milky nature has gone just that way (IV, iii, 98). We are at the court of Edward the Confessor, the saintly English king whose virtues make him a foil for the Scottish hellhound. A passage which might seem to be a digression expatiates on how the royal touch can cure his ailing subjects of the scrofula, known accordingly as the King's Evil. Shakespeare is complimenting the new Stuart monarch, James I, descendant of the legendary Banquo, who had revived the ancient superstition. But the pertinence goes further; for the spokesman of the English king is another doctor; and the antithesis is brought home when we compare the sickness of the one country with that of the other. The King's Evil? Given the omens, the tides, the disaffections, is it not Scotland which suffers from that disease?

A. C. Bradley asserted that Lady Macbeth is "the only one of Shakespeare's great tragic characters who on a last appearance is denied the dignity of verse." That comment discloses a curious insensitivity not only to the ways of the theater, which never interested Bradley very much, but to the insights of psychology, for which he claimed an especial concern. It could be maintained that distracted prose constitutes an intensive vein of poetry. Somnambulism, though fairly rare as a habit among adults (much rarer than sleep-talking), is such a striking one that we might expect it to have had more impact upon the imagination. Yet there seems to be little or no folklore about it, if we may judge from its omission in Stith Thompson's comprehensive Index. It has suggested the rather silly libretto of Bellini's opera, La Sonnambula (based upon a vaudeville-ballet by Scribe), where the sleepwalking heroine compromises herself by walking into a man's room at an inn, and then redeems her reputation by singing a coloratura aria while perambulating asleep on a rooftop. Dissimilarly, Verdi's Macbetto avoids such pyrotechnical possibilities. The prima donna, in her sleepwalking scena, sticks fairly close to Shakespeare's disjointed interjections, though her voice mounts to a Verdian lilt at the high point:

Arabia intera
rimandar sí piccol mano
c'o'suoi balsami non può,
no, no, non può . . .

The only serious dramatization that I can recall, apart from Shakespeare's, is Kleist's Prinz Friedrich von Homburg. In contradistinction to Lady Macbeth, Prince Friedrich has already made his promenade when the play opens; he is discovered at morning seated in a garden; and the garland he is unconsciously weaving adumbrates his dreams of future military glory. The title of Hermann Broch's fictional trilogy, Die Schlaf-wandler, is purely figurative. A melodrama made famous by Henry Irving, The Bells, culminates in the mesmerized reenactment of a crime. It is worth noting that the first Macbeth acted in German (1773), freely adapted by Gottlob Stefanie der Jüngere, replaced the sleepwalking scene by a mad scene in which Macbeth was stabbed to death by his lady. Shakespeare would seem to have been as unique in his choice of subject as in his handling of it.
There is nothing to prevent a mad scene from taking place in the daytime. But Lady Macbeth must be a noctambulist as well as a somnambulist, for her climactic episode brings out the nocturnal shading of the tragedy. *Macbeth*, from first to last, is deeply and darkly involved with the night-side of things. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth apostrophize the darkness, calling upon it to cover their malefactions. The timing of crucial scenes is conveyed, not merely by the convention of lighting candles, but by the recurring imagery of nightfall, overcast and dreamlike as in the dagger speech:

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    Now o'er the one half world
    Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
    The curtain'd sleep.
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(*II, i, 49-51*)

Characters, habitually undressing or dressing, seem to be either going to bed or getting up, like the Porter when he is so loudly wakened. "Light thickens," and the mood can be summed up by the protagonist in a single couplet:

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    Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
    While night's black agents to their preys do rouse.
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(*III, ii, 52-53*)

Critical decisions are reached and fell designs are carried out at hours when night is "Almost at odds with morning, which is which," when the atmosphere—like hell—is murky, and it is hard to distinguish fair from foul or foul from fair (*III, iv, 126*). The penalty for wilfulness is watchfulness, in the sense of staying awake against one's will, of fitfully tossing and turning between bad dreams. Existence has become a watching, a waking dream. Yet "night's predominance," as one of the Thanes describes it, cannot last forever (*II, iv, 8*). Malcolm offers consolation by saying: "The night is long that never finds the day" (*IV, iii, 240*). Macduff is fated to bring in the head of Macbeth on a pike, like the Thane of Cawdor's at the beginning, and to announce the good word: "the time is free" (*V, ix, 21*). The human makes its reflux over the fiendish at long last. After so painful and protracted an agony, after a spell so oneiric and so insomniac by turns, we welcome the daylight as if we were awakening from a nightmare.

**Dieter Mehl (essay date 1983)**


*[In the following excerpt, originally written in German and published in 1983, Mehl follows Macbeth through the course of the dramatic action, delineating the protagonist's agonizing moral struggles, his progressive corruption, and his increasing isolation. Throughout his discussion, the critic calls attention to similarities and differences between Macbeth and the other major tragedies—as well as Richard III and Marlowe's Doctor Faustus—pointing out the many distinctive and innovative features of this play's tragic hero.]*

Compared with *King Lear*, *Macbeth* appears much more simply constructed and easier to understand. Its structure is tight, almost classical in its compelling consistency and there is only one plot. The tragic action, at first sight, is equally transparent. One may, if one is fond of crisp formulas, like V. K. Whitaker reduce it to simply the yielding of a great and good man to temptation and the degeneration of his moral nature resulting from his first deed of sin. But this glib description is hardly adequate to account for the play's unusual fascination and makes it sound like an edifying morality. It is more appropriate to try and understand it in relation to the other three major tragedies and to its historical context.
Although plot and subject are quite different from Hamlet, Othello and King Lear, there are close thematic links between these three plays and Macbeth. The burning question of how evil comes into society and why it has such power over individual characters is only touched on in the earlier tragedies, usually in connection with the protagonist's tragic experience; in Macbeth, it is right at the heart of the play. Claudius, Iago and Edmund are presented as the very incarnation of hatred and corruption, but the dramatist tells us very little about their motives and he never makes them objects of our sympathy. Their well-deserved exposure and punishment is not a central aspect of the tragic impact, but the confirmation of moral order and poetic justice. In Macbeth, however, as has often been remarked, the villain and criminal has become the tragic hero, not in the sense of a cautionary history, but as a disquieting study of human corruptibility and ruthless lust for political power. Lear's agonized question, 'Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?'(III.6.76-7), is not answered, yet in Macbeth Shakespeare has made it the central theme of his tragedy, mainly by a change of perspective. It is not the victims of wickedness and sin that the play is concerned with, but wickedness and sin itself, yet not from an attitude of orthodox certainty, but from a dramatic point of view so close to the protagonist that any superior detachment is made impossible.\textsuperscript{118}

The problem of evil is made spectacularly concrete by the introduction of the Elizabethan mythology of witchcraft, including elements of popular superstition as well as theological speculation. It was well known that the new King James I was deeply interested in all kinds of supernatural phenomena and witch-lore, and it seems reasonable enough to assume that, with this play, Shakespeare deliberately touched on a theme that could not fail to fascinate his monarch and the patron of his company, the King's Men, just as the actual subject, early Scottish history and the descent of the Stuarts from Banquo, seems an obvious compliment to James. Thus, visiting Oxford in 1605, the King was greatly pleased when, in the course of an allegorical pageant, he was hailed as Banquo's heir by the same three Fates who had once promised the crown to his ancestor and his progeny for all eternity.\textsuperscript{119} This topical significance of the tragedy had, without doubt, consequences for the presentation of the story.

It probably explains why Shakespeare's Banquo, in contrast to the dramatist's most important source, Holinshed's chronicle, is not implicated in the murder of Duncan as Macbeth's fellow-conspirator, but serves as a positive moral contrast. There were, however, perfectly good dramatic reasons for this change, as for several other alterations of the historical material. Most of them are due to Shakespeare's most original conception of his tragic hero.

If one compares Macbeth with Holinshed's account, the first thing to be noticed is again the skillful concentration of the action. The Macbeth of the chronicles has ruled justly and with obvious success for some ten years before he turns into a tyrant and his enemies begin to unite against him. The murder of Duncan is more conventionally motivated by the King's weakness, to which Macbeth objects, and by his apparent exclusion from the succession: contrary to established Scottish practice, Duncan declares his son to be his heir, which Macbeth takes as an affront. The murder is the work of a conspiracy, not the brutal crime of an individual. The particularly repulsive circumstances of the act Shakespeare took over from another case of regicide reported by Holinshed: about a century before Macbeth, Donwald vented some private hatred against King Duff and murdered him, at the instigation of his wife, while entertaining him as a guest in his own home. The crime was followed by supernatural portents: for six months there was neither sun by day nor moon by night, and there were several other frightening signs of divine wrath until the deed was avenged, all the murderers cruelly executed and the body of the King properly buried according to his rank. Macbeth's crime, in comparison, is much more political and less spectacular. It is also morally less revolting and of less consequence for the whole realm. The dramatist has transferred some of the supernatural and cosmic phenomena accompanying the murder of Duff to Macbeth's story. He has also condensed the time of the action into a few months and has particularly emphasized the aspect of pricke of conscience\textsuperscript{120} by the apparition of Banquo's Ghost and the sleepwalking scene, neither of which are mentioned in the sources. The comic solo of the porter, too, is his own addition.
Shakespeare's source clearly links this tragedy to his history plays and the similarities with Richard III, including even verbal parallels, have often been noticed. Tillyard calls Macbeth the epilogue to the histories and rightly calls attention to the fact that state and community are more important aspects of the tragic action here than in the other tragedies. It is not only the party of Macbeth's opponents that is victorious at the end, but the whole kingdom, a community whose welfare is dependent on order and law. Malcolm stands for the principle of a good monarch in a much more concrete and meaningful sense than Fortinbras or Albany. Macbeth is in many ways an eminently political play; it demonstrates, very similarly to Richard III, the law of crime and punishment or sin and retribution in history, a law insisted on again and again by Elizabethan historians as well as by the authors of The Mirror for Magistrates. Prophecy and tragic irony as well as the close relationship between individual guilt and cosmic order had already been important issues in Shakespeare's histories and had often even determined their dramatic structure. These plays were, however, less concerned with the individual's struggle against temptation or with private morality. Richard III is in many ways a most fascinating character, but we can hardly say that he undergoes a genuinely tragic experience or that there is any marked personal development. His villainy and his dynamic inhumanity are a part of his nature that is taken for granted; they are not explored in any depths or taken as a central problem in the play, although they can be made more prominent and disturbing in performance.

At the end of the play, Richard, who is confronted by imminent destruction and revenge, talks of his conscience and, in a long soliloquy, sees himself as one of the damned. This is a rather conventional form of self-recognition at the moment of death, and the stylized rhetoric as well as the rather schematic scenic form of the last act makes it difficult for us to see him as a tormented human being with whom we can really identify. At least, the possibility of tragic conflict is not pursued much further in the rest of the play and it is obvious that the play wants us to side with Richard's enemies, most of all the victorious Tudor Richmond.

All this does not mean that it is easy to draw the line between history and tragedy, either in Elizabethan theory and practice or by a general abstract definition; yet most critics agree that the traditional grouping of Richard III with the histories and Macbeth with the tragedies is justified by the character and the subject of the two plays. In spite of its topical interest for Shakespeare's audience and its political aspect, Macbeth is not a historical play. What really absorbs the spectator is not so much the fate of Scotland, but the protagonist's agonizing mental conflict, his farreaching moral decision, and his total collapse under its consequences. It was even Bradley who spoke of our sympathy for Macbeth and though the reactions of individual spectators are bound to differ, the play's undiminished popularity throughout the centuries, in the study as well as on stage, is evidence that Shakespeare has dramatized Macbeth's criminal career in such a way that it does not merely arouse indignation and revulsion, but also a sense of personal involvement and sympathy in the literal sense of our suffering with the hero, which could hardly be said of Richard III. Macbeth's tragic experience is, of course, very different from that of Lear, but it is of the same intensity and energy of imagination and it is no less directly related to fundamental ethical issues. There is a very similar view of human existence as a series of moral decisions beyond the reach of comfortably orthodox definitions.

This is in no way qualified, but rather highlighted by the presence of the witches. Like the Ghost in Hamlet, they are not to be explained as a phenomenon by itself, but are inseparably related to the protagonist and his tragic dilemma. Their first appearance is, above all, designed to create a striking atmosphere of suspense and foreboding. The spectator finds himself transported into a world where human beings are closely observed by supernatural spirits eager to create confusion and to take advantage of man's infirmities. The witches are a rather more sinister version of the elves and fairies in the Midsummer Night's Dream who make fun of the mortals and are amused by their folly. For the 'weird sisters', the political quarrels and bloodshed among men are no more than 'hurly-burly' (1.1.3) where it is all the same who wins and who loses. All the familiar standards of everyday experience are irrelevant to them and thus there is, from the start, a clear opposition between man-made order and this dimension of the unreliable and deceptive, acting as a threat and a challenge: 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (1.1.9). Here it is already evident that these apparitions are neither benign spirits of order nor agents of an inescapable fate, but, in a way that is particularly characteristic of
Shakespeare's dramatic art, combine elements of popular belief and a syncretistic mythology. It is a combination that is possible only in a theatre that is at the same time popular and learned, as only the Elizabethan and early Jacobean theatre was.126

Against this background, the second scene is bound to seem rather less impressive despite its martial rhetoric and talk of heroic exploits. The epic pathos of the blood-smeared eye-witness—obviously modelled on the classical messenger-speech—is clearly marked as something of a declamatory pose by the completely different style of the previous scene. The slightly false grandeur of the diction makes Macbeth's celebrated victory sound like a bloody slaughter as much as a glorious success. The action that is to follow is not anticipated in any detail, but some important themes are sounded and, in retrospect at least,* most spectators will notice the ominous equation of that most disloyal traitor,/The Thane of Cawdor'(L2.54-5) and Macbeth who inherits that former title'. The protagonist is introduced rather indirectly at first, similar to Hamlet, Othello and (very briefly) Lear. Loyalty and a soldier's toughness are the chief virtues ascribed to him from the first, and both are a kind of starting-point for the conflicts that are to follow. With Macbeth's help the King has overcome all his external and internal enemies and he can now, it appears, rely on the new Thane of Cawdor for loyalty and protection.

In the following scene, the two worlds to which we have been introduced confront one another directly, and it is immediately clear from the dramatic style and the language that this is not a normal encounter of partners in a dialogue, but an apparition arranged by the supernatural beings in the course of which the mortals are told as much and no more as lies within the will and the power of the spirits. Like Hamlet, Macbeth and Banquo are directly addressed by the apparition, but they are by no means granted any reliable information. They try to extract some firm instruction, teased by the possibility of obtaining some usually hidden knowledge; the witches, however, create confusion, not certainty and this is perfectly in keeping with Elizabethan ideas of such ghosts and their influence on humans.

In contrast to his source, Shakespeare lays great stress on the different reactions of Banquo and Macbeth and this alone should make perfectly clear that the 'weird sisters'' power over human will is very limited; they can suggest, not direct, and they do not directly circumscribe the freedom of their chosen victim. Macbeth's reaction, effectively described by Banquo for the spectator's benefit, is one of immediate terror and shock. The annunciation of royal dignity fills him with cold fear and this strongly suggests that it hits him in a particularly sensitive spot, that he, like Hamlet, has somehow been prepared for a revelation of this kind, even though this need not be something of which he is himself aware. The spectator knows, however, that the witches who address him as 'Thane of Cawdor' have the advantage of Macbeth who is still ignorant of his new title, and this must give him an idea of their superior knowledge. Banquo, on the other side, is completely unimpressed and sees the witches as a curiosity or a strange deception of the senses. Their announcement is for him no more than a surprising incident, not to be taken too seriously, and he watches its powerful effect on Macbeth with genuine astonishment.

The immediate arrival of Duncan's messengers who greet Macbeth officially as 'Thane of Cawdor' gives to the witches an appearance of prophetic authority and again Shakespeare emphasizes the different effect of this revelation on Banquo and on Macbeth. Banquo's first reaction is amazement at the deceptive power of evil ('What! Can the devil speak true?') (1.3.106)). For him, the obvious explanation is provided by the Christian commonplace that the Fiend often puts on the mask of truth and trustworthiness to deceive us all the more effectively, and he pronounces it with the certainty of an orthodox doctrine:

And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths;
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.
There is no doubt that for many Elizabethans this was the only possible answer to the question of the origin and the authority of supernatural forebodings, and Shakespeare's plays are full of similar statements. Attractive half-truths and pleasant flattery ('honest trifles') are well-tried means of temptation and corruption; but it is only for those who are unaffected and uncorruptible that they are as transparent as they are for Banquo and for the spectator enlightened by him.

Remarkably, both Banquo and Macbeth understand the witches' prophecy as an invitation to act, although this is not explicitly spelt out, and therefore needs the active cooperation of the listener. Banquo uses traditional terms to describe the Devil, and Macbeth, too, speaks of 'supernatural soliciting' (1.3.129). This may be an accurate description of the effect on him of the witches' address and of their secret intention, but it cannot be said that there is any 'soliciting' in their actual words; it is Macbeth's own mind that does the soliciting. It will not be lost on any reader that his reaction provides a terrifying confirmation of Banquo's confident explanation. The witches' prophecies have activated his brain with an irresistible intensity, as Shakespeare makes clear by a most original form of dramatic soliloquy. The conventional 'aside', which usually serves as a device to inform the spectator directly or to draw our attention to deliberate deception on the speaker's part, is here used in a novel way: it indicates a state of intense mental preoccupation and a temporary withdrawal from the dialogue in which he takes part only with a few meaningless phrases. What has really taken possession of his whole mind is reflected in an aside 'that more and more turns into a monologue audible only to the audience. Temptation is not, as in the moralities, an act of persuasion by a seducer, but a mental process within the individual consciousness. Shakespeare here leaves behind him the more conventional dramatic method he himself used in Othello, where Iago still plays the part of Vice and the wicked counsellor. Macbeth, however, is tempter and tempted at the same time, and only the spectator is able to witness his internal struggle.

In the case of more conventional villains, the complicity of the reader or spectator can produce a feeling of amused superiority, perhaps even sneaking admiration. In Macbeth, the technique is obviously a means of manipulating our sympathy. The intensity of the inner conflict qualifies, for us, Banquo's unambiguous, but rather abstract explanation; it is invested with a disturbing concreteness by Macbeth's agony, and this makes it impossible to remain in a state of detached superiority. The driving force behind this tragic conflict is his irrepressible imagination which many critics, before and since Bradley, have described as the hero's most distinct and fatal quality. It compels him to pursue relentlessly the ideas suggested to him by the witches and it prevents him from resisting their destructive consequences. This is what makes the whole scene so characteristic and crucial for what follows. Macbeth does not make a clear-cut, conscious decision to take the evil course, unlike Richard III, whose 'I am determined to prove a villain' (1.1.30) suggests a very different conception of tragedy and may illustrate the fundamental contrast between the two plays. For Macbeth, evil seems to be anything but an attractive alternative to his previous innocence; rather it is a terrifying possibility, and the effect of these imaginings on his whole being is unmistakable:

why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature?

This is a completely new tone in Shakespearian tragedy. Macbeth's description reminds us of the Ghost's account in Hamlet, hinting at the horrors and torments of Hell, of whom he 'could a tale unfold' (1.5.15). Here it
is, however, the sudden and frightening discovery of one's own hellish thoughts that is the most disturbing experience.\textsuperscript{130} Man's extraordinary capacity for completely immobilizing himself by visions of infernal pain and punishment, so powerfully expressed in Hamlet's famous soliloquy, is presented \textit{in actu}:

\begin{verbatim}
Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man
That function is smothered in surmise,
And nothing is but what is not.
\end{verbatim}

(1.3.136-41)

The border-line between reality and imagination becomes increasingly blurred. Macbeth's soliloquy is a demonstration of the experience that the products of our imagination can assume a presence as powerful and active as reality itself. For the first time, the word 'murder' appears in this connection, not introduced by any tempter from without, but entering Macbeth's thoughts of its own accord, as it were, and smothering all normal impulses. None of Shakespeare's tragic heroes before Macbeth has undergone the same experience. Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, perhaps, comes nearest to it. Knowingly he chooses Hell rather than salvation; but then, the terms of his temptation are very different and it is not his imagination as much as his insatiable desire for knowledge and intellectual power that leads him to damnation.

Macbeth does not make a definite decision, but leaves it all to 'chance' and 'time' (1.3.143 and 147), yet the intensity of his temptation and his complete isolation, emphasized by the dramatic technique, prepare the spectator for the sinister development which in the following scene already becomes more clearly foreseeable. The contrast between the outwardly loyal Macbeth, in whom the King puts all the trust disappointed by the previous Thane of Cawdor, and his 'black and deep desires' (1.4.52), is again underlined by an 'aside' that shows his deeply divided mind. The crime now appears as a real possibility that wants to shut out the light of day. He has obviously almost succumbed to the temptation before his wife drives him to the actual committal of the murder, and it is the prophecy of the witches acting on his imagination rather than any more clearly defined political consideration that brings about his fall. The text does not give us all the precise psychological steps that lead to the final decision, but it is clear that Malcolm's proclamation as Duncan's heir—which is not, as in the sources, a clear rejection of Macbeth's own just claim—as well as the announcement of the royal visit make him draw closer to his purpose which even his own eye must not see (1.4.52). Not even his different senses are in harmony with each other, and Macbeth's rhetorical division of eye and hand seems to express an illusory hope that one can commit a crime without being accountable for it with one's complete person.

The whole scene is informed with the contrast between Macbeth's outward behavior and the internal conflict known only to the audience. It is further emphasized by the rhetoric of his professions of loyalty and the unsuspecting trust of the King. The description of the traitor's exemplary death and Duncan's comparison of Macbeth's loyalty with a banquet also contribute to the tragic irony of the scene.

The preparation of the crime stretches over several scenes and this creates the impression of a long and painful temptation which does not happen with the inexorable speed and concentration of Othello's corruption, but needs various different influences and succeeds only after a series of agonizing struggles and strong inner resistance. In this process Lady Macbeth does not, by any means, play the part of a Iago. Before her first appearance, Macbeth has already considered the crime as an actual possibility and he has been changed by the witches' prophecy more than his wife can be aware. Her own, much less scrupulous determination and rejection of any moral doubts rather act as a contrast to the world of his much more complex imagination and direct our sympathies towards Macbeth into whose ear she intends to pour her own poisonous spirit. The progress of his corruption is, in a way, retarded by the presence of his wife because it seems as if it is not the
witches alone who set him on his way to damnation. At the same time, this progress is now, in terms of the dramatic situation, cast in the form of persuasion and personal influence, whereas before it was only presented as a lonely struggle of the hero with his own phantasies.

In *Othello*, as we have seen, the most genuine appreciation of the hero's qualities (as well as of Cassio's) come from the mouth of the slanderer. Similarly, in Lady Macbeth's first speech we get a portrait of her husband whose most humane features seem all the more reliable as they have obviously impressed someone who knows him well and are not, as in the case of Duncan's praise, the result of hypocritical flattery. What Lady Macbeth fears as the chief obstacle to her husband's advancement, 'the milk of human-kindness' (1.5.15), is the very reason why, for the spectator, he becomes a tragic hero and one with whom we can, to some extent, identify because he does not give in to wicked temptation without an agonizing struggle. Lady Macbeth knows nothing of such painful conflict with one's own horrible imaginings (1.3.137) and sees only indecision and weakness where there are genuine scruples. Bradley thought that her lack of imagination was indeed the chief difference between the two.\(^{131}\) The witches hardly mean anything to her, and her determination to commit the crime is as radical as it is unreflected. Her emphatic dedication of herself to the spirits of evil, coupled with an explicit denial of her sex (1.5.38-49), has much more in common with Lear's curse against his eldest daughter (*King Lear* 1.4.272-86), and the wording clearly indicates that she is invoking powers that are against nature, that she is, in fact, repudiating her own human nature by asking to be barren. She deliberately chooses to be one with the witches, and her whole speech reveals that she is already possessed by the spirits to whom she prays. At least, this is how an Elizabethan audience would most probably have understood the scene.\(^{132}\)

In spite of all the dramatic energy of her character, which has made her part one of the most famous and most effective actress's roles in all the tragedies, she is, in comparison with the protagonist, not a very complex character. What makes her so fascinating to the audience is chiefly her fatal impact on Macbeth, not her own character problems or any tragic conflict within her. Her language, too, is much less imaginative, not as rich in associations, but unambiguous in the simplicity and inflexibility of her will-to-power. Still, her dynamic speeches and her powerful impression on other characters in the play provide an ample potential for any great actress, and the impact she can make in a good production is much stronger than her comparatively simple characterization in the text might suggest.

The structure of the first act, with its seven relatively brief scenes, mirrors Macbeth's inner conflict and portrays a world of very contradictory values. Lady Macbeth's threatening expectation of the 'fatal entrance of Duncan' (1.5.37) is followed by Duncan's actual arrival which combines in a particularly impressive way tragic irony and the poetical evocation of untroubled harmony between man and nature. The hoarse raven mentioned by Lady Macbeth is contrasted with the 'temple-haunting martlet' whose trustful nesting in Macbeth's castle makes Duncan and Banquo feel all the more secure and welcome within its walls. Critics have noticed that Shakespeare's imagery creates for us a world of natural harmony and peace that makes the violation of all human loyalties and traditional ties by Macbeth and his wife all the more repulsive.\(^{133}\) The same nature that is completely perverted in Lady Macbeth is presented to us in these images as a power that is fruitful and constructive. But the popular superstition proves to be deceptive and the trusting bird has as little intuitive foreknowledge of the unnatural treason prepared within these seemingly hospitable walls as Duncan who is taken in by the hypocritically fulsome rhetoric of his hosts. The vision of a natural order based on harmony and trust is crucial for our own orientation within a play whose action is shaped by murder and blood. What is all-important, however, is the fact that Macbeth is most conscious of this order and has not, like his wife, once and for all rejected it.

His first great soliloquy, following immediately on his reception of Duncan, once more reviews the possible consequences of the projected deed, but especially its inhuman character. Like Hamlet, who is deeply worried by 'the dread of something after death', Macbeth recognizes man's uncertain fear of a life beyond and of being asked to account for his actions as a powerful impediment when it comes to making moral decisions. He
himself describes the unnatural ugliness of the murder he is about to commit in no uncertain terms as well as its inevitable consequences. The image of the 'angels, trumpet-tongued against/The deep damnation of his taking-off (1.7.19-20) obviously suggest eschatological associations, while 'Pity, like a naked newborn babe'(1.7.21) once again reminds the audience of the unprotected helplessness of an innocent life that can only be shielded by pity from destruction. Divine punishment and retribution, not human revenge are what really frightens Macbeth and they direct the further course of the action. The soliloquy does not announce a decision already made, but it reveals a clarity of vision and a painful awareness of the true situation that again remind us of Hamlet. Lady Macbeth does not add anything to this insight. Her function is rather to cloud his imagination than to oppose his fears and forebodings with a positive vision or an inspiring aim. From the very beginning, it is striking to see how much Macbeth's language and thought are preoccupied with the bloody nature and consequences of the murder and how little there is in his speeches of the real allurements and the hoped-for gain. This obsession with the terrors and the sinister consequences of crime rather than with its glorious rewards marks a characteristic difference between Macbeth and Marlowe's tragic heroes whose dynamic ambition, even where it becomes plainly criminal in execution, is always informed with an alluring vision of the wonderful prize to be reaped in the end. Macbeth and his wife know what they want to gain, but the play's rhetoric hardly ever suggests that the honor they hope to win is worth the terrible price to be paid for it. They seem almost more fascinated by this price than by their original ambition.

The final persuasion is more the result of Lady Macbeth's dynamic and unscrupulous will than of clever arguments or inventive eloquence. She does not really take any notice of his genuine scruples or try to refute them. His intention to abandon further thought of the deed, announced at the beginning of their decisive encounter, is apparently rather superficial and easily dispelled. Nor is her reminder of his oath—of which the audience knows nothing—a carefully prepared argument, but rather a demonstration of her ruthless determination, whose firmness impresses him, just as Hamlet is impressed by the unreflecting impetuosity of Fortinbras and Laertes. All that really frightens him is brushed aside by her insistence on an idea of simple manliness whose most important quality is a fearless readiness to act. To this he can only oppose half-hearted caution, 'If we should fail?'(1.7.59), which she has no difficulty in overruling. For a brief moment, near the end of the scene, he seems to have adopted her firm determination, overwhelmed by her show of masculinity which is only an expression of her obsessed denial of all that is woman in her. When Macbeth himself now decides to combine all the energies of his body in the service of this crime, 'bend up/Each corporal agent to this terrible feat'(1.7.79-80), he acts in opposition to what he himself has experienced and what is more characteristic of his own nature: the agonizing conflict between different senses that makes a really determined and concentrated effort all but impossible for him. This side of himself will soon gain the upper hand again.

The second soliloquy, immediately before the murder, is again the expression of a deeply divided personality and it reveals to the audience the power of an uncontrollable imagination that will always be beyond Lady Macbeth's grasp. The imaginary dagger (11.1.33) symbolizes the unreal nature of the prize Macbeth is aiming at, 'a fatal vision', like the apparition of the witches and just as illusory and elusive. This again raises the question of how reliable our senses are since eyes and hands seem to perceive different things. Macbeth experiences the particular nocturnal hour with an intense awareness of the brutality he is about to commit. This awareness does not in any way diminish the criminal sinfulness of the act, but it brings the hero much closer to the audience because he himself describes the horrors of his crime with such clarity of vision and such intense moral consciousness. The deed is undertaken without any of the enthusiastic determination and enjoyment of his own villainy that is so characteristic of Richard III. There is no cheerful expectation of a glorious reward. Terror and anguish are the prevailing emotions, and the murderer goes off to his victim like one doomed. No murder in the tragedies is committed with so little conviction, and not even a short-lived, liberating triumph is gained by it.

The soliloquy again contributes to a vivid emotional engagement on the part of the spectator, mainly because it does not, like the traditional soliloquies of the villain, try to establish a secret understanding between the
speaker and the audience. It need not be spoken right at the front of the stage, in close contact to the auditorium, but rather serves to express the hero's complete isolation. His vision of the fatal weapon, dramatized in a most effective and original manner, cuts him off from everything around him. Again, a comparison with the soliloquies of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus is instructive: there, too, we have solo scenes whose main purpose is neither reflection nor planning, but the portrayal of a deep emotional and intellectual crisis. Shakespeare departs from his previous practice in the use of soliloquy in order to present Macbeth's fundamentally divided character by this disturbing vision. He is obviously making a moral decision of a most far-reaching nature, but he is clearly beyond rational reflection and a conscious weighing of the issues involved. Without any self-justification or any illusion he really believes in, yet fully conscious of the 'present horror' (II. 1.59) he leaves the stage to commit the murder that has already taken place in his (and in our) imagination. When, only twelve lines later, he re-appears, the irrevocable has happened, and all the rest of the play describes the mental and political convulsions set in motion by this crime. As in classical drama, the actual murder is executed off stage, but Macbeth is perhaps the best example of the way in which the terrifying inhumanity of the crime is impressed on us all the more powerfully by this indirect form of presentation. Poetry and dramatic rhetoric are more effective here than visual representation.

Lady Macbeth herself appears to experience the unnatural atrocity of the murder:

Had he not resembled
My father as he slept, I had done't.

(II.2.12-13)

Even she is unable to commit parricide, yet as King, Duncan is no less sacred, and her hesitation at this point underscores the magnitude of the crime, the violation of natural order and loyalty. 'My father as he slept' also reminds the audience of the familiar world of blood-relationship and domestic harmony that is brutally negated here.

Macbeth's own disturbed state of mind demonstrates the fatal consequences of the crime, following immediately on its execution, even more impressively. As before the deed, his imagination now proves to be completely beyond his control and it becomes the most dangerous instrument of divine revenge. Lady Macbeth's sensible advice, 'Consider it not so deeply' (II.2.30), is totally ineffective and only underlines the intellectual as well as the moral distance between the two; this will continue to widen as the play goes on, in spite of their complicity.

Macbeth's language, with its disjointed and, in places, fragmentary syntax, especially its memorable images, suggests a deeply disturbed consciousness in which the idea of violated order and a peaceful existence never to be recovered has taken root once and for all. The knocking at the gate immediately makes clear that from now on even the most harmless incident turns into a reminder of his guilt. The contrast between his own conviction that his hands will never be clean again and Lady Macbeth's practical advice, 'A little water clears us of this deed' (II.2.67), may explain why, in spite of the repulsive gravity of Macbeth's guilt, the audience is not indifferent or simply hostile towards him, because, for all the progressive hardening of his mind, what Bradley calls a gleam of his native love of goodness is left with him and distinguishes him from her. The ultimate superiority of order and human integrity is made credible in this play not so much by any contrast with positive characters as by Macbeth's own lucid consciousness of moral values, by his continuous references to norms against which he has offended.

The discovery of the crime, the reports of the spectacular and frightening side-effects, and the seemingly successful play-acting of the criminals strike us, after what has gone before, as dramatically brilliant but comparatively conventional, as a diminishing of moral intensity. A certain easing of the dramatic tension before the actual reversal of the tragic development is not, however, a fault of the play's construction, but an
important element of the dramatic rhythm which brings out the real significance of the crime all the more effectively. After Macbeth's horrifying visions before the deed, any of the usual consequences of such a murder must seem comparatively trivial and in the nature of an anticlimax.

Between the scenes of lonely anguish and the return to practical politics, there is a scene which earlier critics suspected to be an un-Shakespearian interpolation, but no modern reader will have any doubts as to its genuineness and its essential function for the total tragic effect of the play. This is the comic solo of the porter whom the knocking at the gate, so terrifying to Macbeth, has roused from his drunken stupor, immediately after Macbeth has expressed the futile hope that the sound might re-awaken Duncan.\textsuperscript{137}

This kind of sharp contrast between two completely different stylistic registers is not unusual in Elizabethan drama or, indeed, in Shakespearian tragedy, even though the descent from tragic pathos to irresponsible clowning seems particularly abrupt here. It does not, however, appear to be out of place in a theatre which, like the Elizabethan public stage, does not aim at creating an illusion of realistic experience and does not attempt to disguise its role as popular entertainment, its eagerness to please. The audience is unashamedly reminded of the human actor behind the stage costume:‘I pray you remember the porter’\textsuperscript{(II.3.19). The clown, asking for his tip, stands for a world of unconcerned vitality; to him, even Hell is only a subject for good-humored joking. It has often been remarked that the scene is closely related to the traditional representation of the Gates of Hell in the moralities,\textsuperscript{138} and this observation can help us to see the thematic significance of this interlude. In a comic manner it suggests religious associations and transforms Macbeth's castle into a place of the damned, if only as an imaginative game played by a drunken servant. The audience will hardly miss the ironic equation between the fictitious sinner greeted by the porter and the real criminals who are already within the gates. The pseudo-learned lecture on the effects of alcohol, too, plays on themes from other parts of the tragedy, especially the dangers of equivocation, of deceptive prophecy that can tempt man into futile efforts. The porter's mock-serious definition is a parody of the forces that have defeated Macbeth. What he says about drink is just as true of his fatal ambition:‘it makes him and it mars him; it sets him on and it takes him off; it persuades him and disheartens him’\textsuperscript{(II.3.30-1).}

Whether we can call this comic relief is a question of the effect of the scene on the individual spectator. Critics have argued about whether this comic interlude actually softens the horrors of the murder scene or makes it even more ghastly by contrast, but this can hardly be decided from the text alone: it depends very much on the disposition of the beholder. The juxtaposition of sublime rhetoric, tragic intensity and a realism without illusions or pretensions is, at any rate, very characteristic of Shakespearian tragedy, and the porter has often been compared with the gravediggers in \textit{Hamlet} for his very similar function. Tragic experience never loses its vital connection with the world of trivial everyday experience. Even those characters who have yet to undergo shattering trials are usually shown, immediately before the catastrophe, in relaxed dialogue with socially much inferior representatives of unblinkered realism and simple wisdom (e.g. Hamlet, Desdemona, Juliet, Lear, Cleopatra). Shakespeare's drama never loses sight of the essential link between comedy and tragedy, their common roots in stylized role-playing.

Macbeth's own shocked horror at the deed he has committed is presented with such dramatic intensity, that the discovery and the frightened reactions of those around him at first only seem like a comparatively harmless epilogue. The spectator does not share the terrified surprise of the unprepared because he has witnessed the planning of the crime. He is thus able to concentrate his attention on the two murderers who successfully pass their first test in hypocritical dissembling and are, for the time being, able to avoid all suspicion, although the immediate flight of Duncan's sons anticipates later developments and clearly diminishes Macbeth's success. The official version of the murder is not accepted by those who are most nearly concerned and the brief transitional scene (11.4), in which we learn about Macbeth's imminent coronation, puts this outward triumph in a context that once more emphasizes the inhumanity of the murder. The figure of the Old Man who is completely separate from the play's action and obviously represents the point of view of simple humanity, further adds to the impression of unnatural violence and offence against sacred pieties. His blessing at the end
of the scene answers the sinister events with a simple definition of humane integrity:

    God's benison go with you, and with those
    That would make good of bad, and friends of foes!

(II.4.40-1)

It is a pointed rejoinder to the witches' 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'(I.1.9) that seems to have directed the dramatic action so far. Without these brief but insistent reminders of a natural sense of justice and human community Macbeth might easily have become a melodramatic presentation of meaningless horror and inescapable nightmare.\textsuperscript{139}

Macbeth soon finds that one crime is not enough to win and to secure the crown for him. It is only by further murder that he can keep what he has gained by the first murder. The dramatist underlines this by making Banquo the first to suspect him and by reminding the audience, through Banquo, of the witches' prophecy of which only the first half has so far become true. By his first murder, Macbeth has tried to prove the truth of what the weird sisters foretold; by the murder of Banquo he wants to prove them liars, but their prophecy is confirmed even in that sense that is most fatal for him; 'fruitless crown' and 'barren sceptre' (III. 1.60-1) are, ultimately, the prize for which he has given away his humanity and sold himself to the inexorable mechanism of crime.

There is a clear contrast between the agonized decision to kill Duncan and the calculating chill of the arrangements to rid himself of Banquo. Neither supernatural visions nor the energy of Lady Macbeth are needed, and no moral scruples seem to weaken his determination although he is fully aware of Banquo's 'royalty of nature' (III. 1.49). As in other tragedies by Shakespeare, the special virtues of the villain's opponent are most eloquently and reliably praised by him who is provoked by them into destructive hatred:

    to that dauntless temper of his mind
    He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour
    To act in safety. There is none but he
    Whose being I do fear; and under him
    My genius is rebuked as, it is said,
    Mark Antony's was by Caesar.

(III.1.51-6)\textsuperscript{140}

Banquo is characterized almost more impressively by Macbeth's fears than by his own actions.

It is only for one brief scene that the audience witnesses a protagonist who is fully in command, who is capable of efficient planning and who confronts the murderers with the same ruthless determination as that shown by Lady Macbeth in the first act. Like her, he now presents to them a primitive ideal of undaunted manliness in order to persuade them to undertake the murder. It is one of the few scenes in which the initiative is all with Macbeth, but the audience already knows enough about the witches' prophecies to doubt the possibility of lasting success for him, and even the very next scene (III.2) reveals that, in contrast to Richard III, the part of the accomplished intriguer and murderer is only a mask, kept up with great effort. Even more striking and characteristic of Macbeth's tragic isolation is the increasing distance between him and his wife. His behavior makes her, too, gradually realize the questionable and elusive nature of what they have gained and she voices something like a superficial moral of the tragedy:

    Naught's had, all's spent,
    Where our desire is got without content.
’Tis safer to be that which we destroy  
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.

(III.2.4-7)

The rhyming simplicity of this orthodox commonplace would be more fitting for a pathetic murder story like the anonymous play *Arden of Feversham*, where the sinning lovers, immediately after the murder of the husband who has stood in their way, find that all the joy has gone out of their union and the fruits of the crime prove to be illusory.141 Something of this simple Christian experience is also taken for granted in *Macbeth*, but this does by no means explain the play, because the intensity and complexity of Macbeth's struggle cannot be reduced to a simple morality even though, in the last resort, the play endorses, for the Christian spectator, the self-destructive sterility of evil.

Macbeth's anguished fears are beyond the reach of Lady Macbeth's comforting words and it is essential to notice that he does not take her into his confidence regarding his further murderous plans. In fact, their roles have temporarily been exchanged: it is he who appears to be concerned about her peace of mind (‘Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck’(III.2.45)) and who invokes the night to blind the tender eye of pitiful day and to 'Cancel and tear to pieces all moral law' (III.2.46-50). It is no surprise to the spectator that the attempt fails completely. Banquo's son escapes and most contemporary spectators must have known that they were ruled by a supposed descendant of his.

The return of Banquo's Ghost, like so many similar apparitions in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, is a visual reminder of unreavenged crime and imminent retribution. It is one of the most original and dramatically effective variations of conventional ghost scenes. Macbeth's attempt to celebrate reconciliation, hierarchic order and peaceful community by a banquet is thwarted not by those around him nor by any suspicion against him from outside, but by his own inability to shake off the crime. Whether one interprets the Ghost as a kind of hallucination, which seems to be a rather too psychological and superficial explanation, or as reality, the work of a diabolic or a benign fate, it is certainly a powerful expression of the fact that even the murder he has delegated to others begins to haunt Macbeth and that his mental disturbance is now apparent to others besides himself.142 He is unable to perform his duties as host and thus unable to justify his usurped power by domestic order and internal peace, as the Macbeth of the chronicles managed to do for a period of some ten years:

    You have displaced the mirth, broke the good meeting  
    With most admired disorder.

(III.4.108-9)

The terror aroused by the Ghost within Macbeth is not so much a sign of moral compunction or fear of discovery, but rather the result of the sudden realization that nothing whatever has been gained by the murder and that the crime is not a thing of the past. All further action is determined by this violation of the social order. The façade of self-assurance can only be preserved by new guilt and by deliberate hardening against any human impulse. At the end of the scene, Macbeth is determined to proceed along this fatal path. From now on he lives only for his own safety and explicitly rejects any thought of a return:

    For mine own good  
    All causes shall give way. I am in blood  
    Stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more,  
    Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

(III.4.134-7)
The idea of blood, which keeps reappearing in this tragedy with unusual insistence, is extended into a memorable image that anticipates Macbeth's further course for the spectator and expresses his frightening hardness of heart more powerfully than any theological treatise.

His decision to seek out the witches shows what power they have gained over his will and to what extent he is now prepared to submit to their fatal influence. His deterioration into a tyrant who has no other aim than to secure his throne, is complete and the following part of the play is mostly concerned with the opposing forces gathering against him. It is only towards the end that his own personality takes the centre of the stage again.

The scenes with Hecat (III.5 and part of IV.1) are of somewhat doubtful authenticity and it is quite possible that these spectacular incidents are later additions to satisfy the audience's interest in such stage-effects and in historical prophecy. Hecat's speeches are rather out of tune with the style and the content of the other witch-scenes and they do not quite agree with the character of these creatures earlier in the play. Their function as instruments of hellish corruption is spelt out in too simple terms whereas in the first scenes, the witches only announced a few general prophecies that so deeply impressed Macbeth and made him commit double murder. By the time of this new meeting he has already become so dependent on them that there is little left for them to do. There is no question of actual temptation or corruption; Macbeth is only confirmed in his vicious course and encouraged with doubtful hopes. Hecat's words, though, suggest a more active function:

raise such artificial sprites  
As by the strength of their illusion  
Shall draw him on to his confusion.
He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear  
His hopes'bove wisdom, grace, and fear.

(III.5.27-31)

This is a fairly exact description of Macbeth's further career, but the illusion that destroys him is no outward compulsion overruling man's free will; it activates Macbeth's determination to the point of a monomaniac obsession with the securing of his power and the elimination of all possible enemies. At the same time, he is strengthened by a sense of false security founded on most ambiguous prophecies. The oracular promises are as deceptive as Macbeth's self-confidence, inspired by the witches' black magic. It is certainly their intention to deceive him, but, as before the murder of Duncan, his own cooperation is needed to make the deception effective. In this instance, he is evidently willing to interpret the riddling message rather hastily in a sense most favorable to him.

The vision of the long line of Banquo's descendants as future Kings may be a theatrical homage to the first Stuart King. It also dramatizes Macbeth's terror at the idea of his own short-lived glory. 'Sweet bodements' are succeeded by 'Horrible sight' (IV.1.95 and 121) and Macbeth is quite unable to preserve the detached integrity of his moral responsibility, as Banquo did. He realizes that his intercourse with the witches is for him a 'pernicious hour' (IV.1.132), limiting his personal freedom, and yet he allows himself to be deceived by the false authority of the magic spectacle and his future actions to be determined by it. Will and imagination are finally corrupted when, at the end of the scene, he decides to exterminate Macduff's family. This exceeds even the brutality he has committed so far. At this point he has become most like the monster Richard III.

Although Shakespeare places the personality of his tragic hero, poisoned by his perverted imagination, firmly in the centre of the play (in contrast to the earlier history play), he also, especially in the second half, makes him part of the larger community of the state, not so much by political discussion or crowd scenes, but by the idea of a country suffering under tyrannous rule and by the contrast to the blessed government of Edward the Confessor in England. Between the two Hecat scenes, we hear of the generous reception of Malcolm at the
English Court in the conversation between Lennox and another Lord who has no further part in the action. There are strong hopes of liberation from crippling suppression and twice the word 'tyrant' is used within the brief dialogue. From now on, it frequently takes the place of Macbeth's name. The vision of a brighter future implies the collapse of all familiar order and all natural forms of community under Macbeth's tyranny:

we may again
Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights,
Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives,
Do faithful homage and receive free honours—
All which we pine for now.

(III.6.33-7)

Even the most elementary forms of life have been threatened by Macbeth's crimes.

The pathetic family in Macduff's castle illustrates this kind of harmless and harmonious order, destroyed by the brutal will of the tyrant. The murder of these completely innocent and in no way dangerous blood-relations of Macduff cannot be justified by any political calculation, but is rather the manifestation of a blindly destructive bestiality to which Macbeth has sunk.

To this, the long scene at the English Court opposes a completely different form of rule and a demonstration of human integrity. It serves as a reminder of Macbeth's isolation and imminent defeat. Malcolm's royal nature, inaccessible to any corruption, proves that it is possible to resist the powers of evil that have been so successful up to now. There is no necessary and inevitable conflict between a man's appearance and his true nature; at least goodness must never make use of an evil mask, as Malcolm explains:

Angels are bright still though the brightest fell.
Though all things foul would wear the brows of grace,
Yet grace must still look so.

(IV.3.22-4)

The biblical associations and the reference to the witches ('all things foul') are obvious. Malcolm lives in a world that is already outside Macbeth's experience and the length of the scene is a sign of how important the contrast is for the dramatist. The testing of Macduff by Malcolm takes up a surprising amount of room even in Holinshed's chronicle; it is obviously meant to show that Malcolm has all the qualities of the perfect king and that Macduff's integrity is above temptation. The dialogue unfolds the picture of an ideal king almost in the manner of a didactic debate. The impression of a world completely corrupted by the tyrant's murderous ambition is thus modified; in Richard III, this only happens very near the end, by the idealizing presentation of Richmond. Here, the principle of goodness and of beneficial rule is embodied not only in Macbeth's opponents, but in the English King, gifted with divine powers of healing, who makes England a haven of peace outside the 'poor country', tormented by tyrannous oppression and several times lamented in the course of the scene. We are left with the vivid impression that Macbeth's personal tragedy has involved all the people of Scotland who are groaning under his yoke and longing for liberation. This idea is conveyed to the audience not so much in political terms as by the image of a living organism, personified as the bleeding victim of the murderer from whose clutches it must be saved. Macduff's own suffering is part of this general sorrow. Where wives and children can no longer live in safety, the commonwealth has broken down and there must be a completely new beginning. This duel between two opposing principles is clearly seen as the decisive confrontation of Good and Evil, Day and Night, legitimate rule and arbitrary tyranny, and in this respect Macbeth is closer to the traditional morality pattern than the other tragedies.
The contrast is underlined by the dramatic switch back to Macbeth's castle where the physician, presumably played by the same actor who represented the physician at the English Court,\textsuperscript{146} confesses his powerlessness in the face of Lady Macbeth's illness. The sleepwalking scene recapitulates, in fragmented prose, important motifs from the first part of the play, in particular the ineradicable traces of the blood shed by the murderers. The fact that Macbeth's most hardened and determined accomplice breaks down even before him is an important aspect of the play's manipulation of our sympathies. His isolation becomes more and more complete and the presence of a vengeful fate is felt more and more acutely. The physician, too, points out that Lady Macbeth's disturbed state of mind falls outside the competence of medical advice:

More needs she the divine than the physician

(V.I.70)

We are clearly reminded of the previous scene, with its account of the English King's healing gift.

Shakespeare has inserted yet another scene before the protagonist reappears on stage. As in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, the hero is absent for some time during the fourth or the first part of the fifth act and the dramatic suspense is kept up by concentration on other aspects of the action as well as by indirect characterization. In *Macbeth*, this technique mainly strengthens the impression that the number of Macbeth's opponents is continually growing. Even his enemies, Angus and Menteth, regard him not just as a tyrant that has to be exterminated, but as a thoroughly 'distempered' and despairing murderer who can defend his position only with the greatest effort and whose royal dignity sits uneasily on him, like an ill-fitting garment (V.2.20-2). The comparison of his title with a 'giant's robe' that is far too large for this despicable moral stature harks back to earlier uses of the clothes metaphor and it makes very clear that Macbeth can no longer impress his subjects with his usurped authority.\textsuperscript{147} The image of blood sticking to the murderer's hands is also brought up again (V.2.17) and it is thus evident that Macbeth's guilt is no longer a matter of his personal tragic experience, but a public affair that has set armies in motion and affected the whole nation.

When Macbeth himself comes back to the stage, he seems, on the one hand, completely obsessed by his belief in the witches' ambiguous prophecies, on the other, he describes himself as 'sick at heart' (V.3.19) and he is fully conscious of what he has forfeited. Again it is the contrast between his haunted life and the simple expectations of a 'normal' everyday existence that serves to show how utterly he has excluded himself from all human intercourse:

And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have;

(V.3.24-6)\textsuperscript{148}

The brief dialogue with the physician once more draws attention to the poisonous infection that has spread from the guilty individual to the whole nation. Though Macbeth is, consciously, merely referring to the threat to his country from the invading troops, his metaphor has a much deeper resonance for the spectator, especially since the image of disease has been used in the play before with similar implications:

If thou couldst, doctor, cast
The water of my land, find her disease
And purge it to a sound and pristine health,
I would applaud thee . . .

(V.3.50-3)
The perversion of all human instincts by guilt has seized the individual (‘a mind diseased' (V.3.40)) as well as the social structure and for both the physician's advice that the patient must minister to himself (V.3.45-6) is, in the context of the play, equally valid. For the country it means casting out Macbeth in whom the disease seems to be personified, but he himself and his wife have passed the point where return and health are still a possibility. Unlike Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, Macbeth is not reminded of the divine grace that is still within reach until the last by any voice from within or without. Repentance and forgiveness of sins are no subjects for this tragedy. The tyrant must be exterminated if the country is to recover peace and lawful order.

And yet, even to the end, there is more than just horrified revulsion or untroubled satisfaction at Macbeth's death. The Aristotelian rule that the tragic hero must be neither all good nor totally evil is not altogether neglected in this case, even though the reaction of the audience is not likely to be entirely uniform. I think that Bradley's impression, ‘To the end he never totally loses our sympathy', is shared by most readers of the play, as long as 'sympathy' is not interpreted in a narrow sense. There is no question that the whole tragedy means us to side with Macbeth's opponents and that nobody can seriously wish him longer success, but it is equally clear that the play's ending is very different from the triumph at Bosworth, even though the political situation is not unlike that at the close of Richard III (as far as Malcolm's right of succession is concerned it is, in fact, even less open to debate) and Macbeth is not allowed any heroic gesture of self-recognition, like Othello.

What is crucial for our reaction, however, is that up to the end we never see Macbeth as a 'born criminal', but always remember the painful process of his corruption by illusion and blind ambition. Of Othello it is said, 'that wert once so good' (V.2.288), which would be hardly thinkable in the case of Macbeth because the play begins immediately with his temptation and fall. Yet the whole action of the play seems to be based on the assumption that his career, too, is, morally speaking, a fall from great height and that there was once a 'good' Macbeth whose corruption is the real centre of the tragedy. The fact that at the end he has reached such an extreme degree of hardening that only his extermination can be hoped for, is no more than a disturbing consequence of his decision to listen to the voices of evil. The play shows us a different stage in the hero's tragic experience and a different kind of moral deterioration than Othello, but the two plays are based on a very similar concept of evil and its effects on human relationships.

At the very end, the hero does not suddenly come to realize what he has lost, because he has known that all along and, unlike Othello, he did not commit his crimes in the fond belief that his cause was just. He himself has experienced and described the reality of evil in such unambiguous terms that there is no need for any moral dénouement. The only thing that surprises him, as well as the spectator, about his defeat is the way in which the prophecy of the weird sisters, that had lulled him with a false sense of security, comes true. Once this is realized all hope and courage leave him, though this hardly seems to affect his deeper despair which makes him unable to think of anything but his own misery and fearful decline. He himself suggests that this hardening against the most basic human impulses and values is not something he was born to, but the result of a painful process that has changed his whole personality:

I have almost forgot the taste of fears.
The time has been my senses would have cooled
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir
As life were in't.

(V.5.9-13)

This is to remind us of a Macbeth we have only had very brief glimpses of, a Macbeth as the whole play assumes him to have existed before the beginning of his tragedy. When, however, he goes on to confess, 'I have supped full with horrors' (V.5.13), he takes up the image of the banquet, recalling the disrupted ritual of the third act as well as suggesting associations of an unholy alliance with the powers of evil, a communion
that effectively excludes him from the community of man. In this state, the news of his wife's death seems to
affect him very little because all human existence has become meaningless for him. If the passage in question
were not so often quoted out of its context, it would hardly be necessary to point out that his frightening
description of an absurd life is by no means an account of Shakespeare's personal convictions but is meant to
c caracterize the agony of the protagonist:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(V.5.24-8)

Biblical associations are combined with the traditional image of life as a stage-play. What for Jaques, in As
You Like It, was no more than the expression of self-conscious melancholy ('All the world's a stage'[H.7.139]),
is for Macbeth the painful experience of a tragic illusion. It is immediately followed by the report of the
messenger who has witnessed the unnatural movement of Birnam Wood. This is the beginning of Macbeth's
final defeat and the fulfilment of the witches'riddling prophecy. Macbeth himself begins to realize that he has
been the victim of the equivocation of the fiend/That lies like truth'(V.5.43-4).

As in Hamlet, references to the language of the Bible and to Christian concepts of damnation and salvation
appear more frequently towards the end of the play. For those readers and spectators who are familiar with
this traditional background, Macbeth is one of the damned, and the pains of Hell he has to suffer consist
mainly in his inability to forget or suppress what he has lost by his own free choice. Already Coleridge, and
Bradley after him, felt that Macbeth reminded him of Milton's Satan who realizes with anguish that he is
forever barred from any community with goodness, when he has sneakingly entered Paradise, and it seems to
me quite probable that Milton was partly inspired by Shakespeare's tragedy when he made Satan reflect on his
fallen state in Paradise Lost:

For onely in destroying I finde ease
To my relentless thoughts . . .

(IX. 129-30)

But what will not Ambition and Revenge
Descend to? who aspires must down as low
As high he soard, obnoxious first or last
To basest things. Revenge, at first though sweet,
Bitter ere long back on it self recoiles;

(IX.168-72)\textsuperscript{151}

The parallel is instructive, though it only applies to one aspect of Macbeth and should not be generalized.
Milton's openly stated intention to'justifie the wayes of God to men'(I.26) is hardly the central concern of
Shakespeare's play, but the intensity with which Macbeth's moral hardening is presented as a relentless
process of deterioration and suffering at the same time, can explain why Macbeth has repeatedly inspired
Christian interpretations, though these have often rather reduced than illuminated the tragic impact of the
text.\textsuperscript{152} Macbeth's decision and his gradual perversion are placed in a world of political and heroic values and
are not primarily assessed in dogmatic categories, though the imagery suggests associations with a fallen
angel as well as with Marlowe's Faustus. These biblical and religious associations, together with our insight
into the moral and spiritual corruption of an individual meant by his creator to be good, are important elements of this particular tragedy and they prevent us from experiencing Macbeth's death only as the well-deserved end of a political criminal. The vitality of the dramatic rhetoric, the rich images and precise metaphors contribute to the impression of an intense questioning and seeking to discover coherence and meaning in a world of challenging opportunities. Macbeth is determined to act, not to wait patiently for the gifts of fortune, and he does not try to escape from the consequences of his own actions. All this does not in the least detract from his moral responsibility, but it may help to account for the fact that his fate affects most readers and spectators as more tragic (in the traditional sense) than the defeat of Richard III.

The ending confirms the presence of a benign providence that means to grant Scotland a period of stable peace and lawful order; yet the author of the disturbance and chaos is not denied all human greatness and potential integrity. Both points of view have to be recognized for an adequate understanding of the play.\footnote{153}

The patriotic optimism of the closing tableau is not likely to convince us, after all that has gone before, as a true and complete summary of the play's tragic vision. The country can breathe freely and the days are near at hand/That chambers will be safe'(V.4.1-2). 'The time is free'(V.6.94), but reader and spectator cannot merely rejoice at the liberation from the tyrant's rule because they have been witnesses to a dimension of the action of which the surviving actors themselves are unaware. None of the survivors knows anything about the supernatural influences embodied in the witches and none has any true idea of Macbeth's temptation and anguish of conscience.\footnote{154} For them it is enough to look at"The usurper's cursèd head'(V.6.94) and to hear the promises of the new King. But it is partly this muted and only outwardly cheerful quality of the ending that makes it so different from the proclamation of Henry Tudor at the conclusion >Richard III. Our interest in the history of the community and the future of Scotland cannot quite suppress our sympathy with the fall of the protagonist and his lonely agonies. If critics insist on the play's more confident optimism in comparison with the ending of King Lear they often seem to me to take insufficient account of this ambivalence at the close. It is the result of the unusual combination of history and tragedy as well as the evocative poetry and the dramatist's manipulation of our sympathy which makes any simple moral interpretation totally inadequate. Bradley quite rightly includes Macbeth in his still very impressive description of Shakespearian tragedy or rather what he considers our reaction to it:

\begin{quote}
  moral order . . . has lost a part of its own substance,—a part more dangerous and unquiet, but far more valuable and nearer to its heart, than that which remains,—a Fortinbras, a Malcolm, an Octavius. There is no tragedy in its expulsion of evil: the tragedy is that this involves the waste of good.\footnote{155}
\end{quote}

In this fundamental respect, Macbeth is not as different from the other great tragedies as it may seem at first sight, even though the emphasis is different and the process of moral perversion is explored with greater dramatic intensity than the experience of tragic suffering. This is why at the end there is not the customary obituary, paying due respect to the greatness of the departed hero. Only the audience knows that there is more that ought to be remembered than the survivors of the tragedy have witnessed and that much more has perished than this dead butcher'(V.6.108).\footnote{156}

Notes


See Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London, 1983), VII, 429-31 and 470-2. Bullough discusses all the historical background (pp. 423-69) and reprints the most important texts, especially the relevant passages from Holinshed's, *The Chronicles of England, Scotlannde, and Irelande* (1587).

See Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, VII, 498.


See Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater* (Baltimore, 1978), pp. 192-6, on 'Popular Myth and Dramatic Poetry'. *Macbeth* is only mentioned in passing, but the discussion is quite relevant here.

See Hunter's note on the passage, p. 143.


Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 294-301: 'an imagination on the one hand extremely sensitive to impressions of a certain kind, and, on the other, productive of violent disturbance both of mind and body. Through it he is kept in contact with supernatural impressions and is liable to supernatural fears' (p. 295).

Angelo in *Measure for Measure* has a very similar experience (cf. II.2.162-87).

Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 311-14.


For a very sensitive interpretation of this soliloquy, see Wolfgang Clemen, *Shakespeares Monologe. Ein Zugang zu seiner dramatischen Kunst* (München, 1985), pp. 159-66. An English translation of this book is in
preparation.

135 See Hamlet's soliloquy immediately before the prayer scene (III.2.379-83), which seems much more conventional in comparison.


On the porter scene, see Muir's introduction to his edition, pp. xxv-xxxii, and John B. Harcourt, 'I Pray You, Remember the Porter', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 12 (1961), 393-402.


139 This is how the play appears in Jan Kott's influential book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (London, 1964), pp. 89-100.


142 On the various traditions of staging this scene, its emotional and symbolic dimensions, see Marvin Rosenberg's exhaustive study, *The Masks of Macbeth* (Berkeley, 1978), pp. 428-89. The book gives an invaluable account of how many great actors and producers have interpreted each scene of the play.


145 See IV.3.31, 100, 103-8, 164-73.

146 See the commentary in Hunter's edition, pp. 177 and 181.

147 See also I.3.144-6, where it is said of Macbeth:

    New honours come upon him
    Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mould
    But with the aid of use.

148 The passage is often singled out for its effect on our sympathy for the hero; it reminds us of the natural and ordinary sphere of life, from which Macbeth has excluded himself. See Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 305-6, Knights, *Some Shakespearean Themes*, p. 114, and Hunter's edition, pp. 26-7.

149 *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 305. It was De Quincey who first argued against a too narrow concept of 'sympathy'; see his essay referred to in n. 137 above.
Hunter very rightly speaks of the idea of a 'good' Macbeth, buried somewhere beneath the activities of a will dedicated to evil (p. 26).


This seems to me a very important point. See also Emrys Jones, *Scenic Form in Shakespeare*, p. 224: ‘there is nothing of the jubilant mood of the conclusion of Richard III’.


Here again, the play's stage history can provide important clues to the interpretation and draw attention to problems the literary critic tends to overlook or to overestimate. Rosenberg's study, *The Masks of Macbeth* is invaluable in this respect. See also on various aspects of the play, especially in performance, John Russell Brown, ed., *Focus on Macbeth* (London, 1982), a very stimulating collection of essays, including an interview with Peter Hall on his experience as a producer of Macbeth.

**Macbeth (Vol. 44): Psychoanalytic Interpretations**

Robert N. Watson (essay date 1984)


[In the following excerpt, Watson supplements the traditional Freudian or oedipal interpretation of Macbeth by focusing on the symbolic aspects of the hero's ambition. In the critic's judgment, the murder of Duncan represents Macbeth's perverse attempt to establish a new identity through a ruinous disruption of the normal cycles of procreation and generation.]

Shakespeare portrays Macbeth's crimes, from first to last, as costly violations of the procreative cycle. Dr. Isadore Coriat, one of the play's first psychoanalytic critics, identifies the witches who instigate these offenses as "erotic symbols, representing, although sexless, the emblems of the generative power in nature. In the hell broth' are condensed heterogeneous materials in which even on superficial analysis one can discern the sexual significance." But superficial analysis dismisses too easily the discordant aspects of that emblem. These bearded women provoke Macbeth to mix the sexual elements ruinously, as they provoked him to mix the elements of the other natural cycles that must be polarized to be regenerative: night with day, dreaming with waking, and fall with spring. Under their influence he misuses his generative powers in such a way that he undermines the hereditary order, rendering his sexuality as barren and distorted as their own.
The Oedipal crimes constitute a man's ultimate offense against his hereditary nature, and the most insidious mixture of the generational cycles, which must remain distinct to remain healthful. Since so much has been written about the Freudian implications of *Macbeth*, however, this chapter will examine only those aspects of the Oedipal situation that relate to ambitious revisions of identity. Macbeth conspires with the temptress to "do the deed" that will make him king, or remake him as king. Norman Holland outlines the standard psychoanalytic axioms about the play: "Macbeth acts the role of a son who replaces the authority of his father by force and substitutes himself. The motive for this father murder is Lady Macbeth, the 'demon woman' who creates the abyss between father and son." Since Gertrude is the prize of Claudius' crime, Hamlet holds her partly responsible for that crime; Richard III entraps the Lady Anne by a trickier version of the same deduction. Freud argues that the woman's passive role gradually became misinterpreted in "the lying poetic fancies of prehistoric times" until the mother became an active instigator. Lady Macbeth seems to offer herself as the sexual prize of Macbeth's regicide, and threatens to become the murderous mother rather than the seductive mother if he refuses the task (1.7.56-59).

But, from my point of view, the reading of the crime as essentially ambitious rather than essentially sexual squares better with the situations the psychoanalysts describe. What Lady Macbeth actually provokes in her husband is an ambitious deed; the analogy to the Oedipal situation may be a resonance rather than a primary but veiled meaning. In offering to become either the seductive mother or the murderous one, she is reminding him that it is in his own power to decide whether to create this new royal self or to destroy it in its infancy. His success in creating it will be a measure of his sexual capacity, but that sexual provocation remains at the distance of a metaphor, and is intimately linked to the goal of a new birth rather than to any goal of sensual gratification. Occam's Razor seems to cut against the traditional Freudian reading in this case. Sexuality is Lady Macbeth's means to an ambitious end in the play's superficial psychology, and it would be fitting for the same transaction to apply on the play's deep figurative level. If psychoanalytic critics argue that "Macbeth's killing of Duncan represents hatred and resentment of a fatherlike authority" and that "Lady Macbeth embodies or projects Macbeth's ambitious wish," as Holland summarizes it, then the tensions seem more applicable to the hazards of ambition than to the "family romance" as such. Duncan is not Macbeth's actual father, but plays the paternal role in limiting the legitimate range of Macbeth's aspiration; the play makes it clear that Duncan is not a restrictive authority except in holding his preeminence and in promising it to another heir before Macbeth. Lady Macbeth is not Macbeth's actual mother, but plays the maternal role in offering to "embody" an ambitious new self for him.

Several critics have suggested that the murder of Duncan is figuratively a rape, or that the murder is only the offspring, or the projection onto Duncan, of a sexual crime between Macbeth and his Lady. Rather than making either the violent or the sexual aspect of the "deed" merely a metaphor for the other, however, my thesis makes them mutually dependent: this is a rape with procreative purposes, and it entails ripping the hereditary body politic untimely from its haven in Duncan's body. (The revelation of Macduff's Caesarean origins is, in this sense, another example of Macbeth's crime functioning as a rash wish that unwittingly invites its own punishment.) But this sinister seduction turns out to be a dismal failure. One critic equates the spirits of drink that the Porter says inspire but hinder sexual activity with the spirits that appear to Macbeth as witches: for each man, "The spirits that seem to make him potent actually render him impotent." The sexual situation is again not merely parallel to the political situation, but intimately linked to it: the attempt to conceive a new self becomes instead a loss of the original birth, and the effort to seize sovereignty over the process of procreation and lineage is steadily revealed as a forfeiting of all procreative abilities and lineal aspirations. Macbeth is left with a "barren sceptre" (3.1.61): the ambitious abuse of his sexual powers has ruined those powers. His castration, like that of Oedipal sons, is the final result of indulged Oedipal impulses; his impotence, like that of fisher-kings in myth, leads necessarily to his expulsion from rule.

The phallic character of Macbeth's crime is clear enough, however one chooses to interpret it. Led by a dagger, he advances toward Duncan's bed-chamber "With Tarquin's ravishing strides" (2.1.55). Newly convinced by his wife to assert his sexual manhood by this deed, to become the "serpent" striking up through...
the "innocent flower" (1.5.64-65), Macbeth claims to "bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat" (1.7.79-80); and when conscientious fear renders him impotent to act, she says, "You do unbend your noble strength" (2.2.42). When she mocks him for lacking the "manhood" to finish that task, she chooses to call him "Infirm of purpose" (2.2.49). The murder is described by everyone, including the perpetrators, as a "deed" or "act"; but these euphemisms for the horror that "Tongue nor heart cannot conceive nor name" (2.3.64-65) refer to sexual deeds or acts as often as murderous ones in Shakespeare. This convergence of the two acts suggests the mixed crime of Oedipus; since the direct result is the creation of an exalted but sinister Macbeth, it may refer to the aspect of the Oedipus story that focuses on pride and identity, rather than the aspect that focuses on sexual psychology for its own sake.

The regicide is not the first time Macbeth has violently "conceived" an exalted new self and hewed its Caesarean path to life through another's body. Scotland is conventionally described as a mother throughout Macbeth, and only a few lines into the play we see Macbeth emerge as her heroic child. Using his "brandish'd steel" to make himself "valor's minion," he "carv'd out his passage" to Macdonwald and "unseam'd him from the navel to the chops." A "passage" was a standard term in Renaissance medicine for "the necke of this wombe" at the base of the uterus. Richard II uses the same term when he strives to "tear a passage thorough the flinty ribs / Of this hard world, my ragged prison walls" for his rebirth in "A generation of still-breeding thoughts" (5.5.6-21), and Shakespeare will use it again to describe Coriolanus'determination to chop "his passage" through "Rome gates," which (as I will argue) become the symbol of his mother's womb through which any viable rebirth must pass.

Macbeth's first rebirth, however, is a defense of Duncan's paternal privileges rather than an assault on them. Disdaining the sinister allure of the "rebel's whore" Fortune—a version of the Oedipal temptress—Macbeth and Banquo confirm their identities as "children and servants" to Duncan's throne (1.4.25). But once the prospect of creating heroic new identities with their swords has presented itself, the loyal soldiers become susceptible to the lure of the sinister witches, who offer them a rebirth that evades rather than affirms their hereditary subordination. The witches are Jocasta-figures, avatars not only of the temptress-figure Lady Macbeth with whom they share a provocation and a sexual ambiguity, but also of that sinister temptress Fortune, with whom they share a name: etymologically as well as mythologically, "the three weird sisters" are the women of fortune. Furthermore, witches and midwives were strongly identified with each other in sixteenth-century England, particularly in accusations that midwives induced birth to give the child a soul, then consecrated that soul to Satan by ritualistically killing the infant before it could be baptized. The parallels between this accusation and the witches'instigation of Macbeth's rebirth, death, and damnation, are certainly speculative, but also intriguing. Once it becomes clear that his first rebirth has not granted Macbeth a place in the royal lineage, he determines to use the same figurative technique that made him Duncan's loyal son to become Duncan's rebellious son. As with Prince Hal, Shakespeare undoes the dream-work of a boy's father-saving fantasy, revealing the latent father-killing fantasy that was lurking symmetrically behind it. The witches perform the same psychoanalytic function, for Macbeth and for us, encouraging him to recognize the inevitable Oedipal conflict arising from his role as Duncan's child and servant, and thereby to recognize the perverse psychological mechanism connecting his loyal deeds with his "horrible imaginings."

The witches'prophecy is what sets the play's tragic aspect in motion, and it does so by luring Macbeth away from the normal cycle of generation. The prophecy seems to announce an equitable distribution of glory to the two triumphant soldiers: rule to Macbeth and succession to Banquo. But, as Lucien Goldmann suggests, the tragic hero generally finds that his gods "speak to him in deceitful terms and from afar off, the oracles which he consults have two meanings, one apparent but false, the other hidden but true, the demands which the Gods make are contradictory, and the world is ambiguous and equivocal." The hidden truth in the riddling prophecy, arising from the fog of the "foul and fair" day on the heath, is that the two promised forms of glory are mutually exclusive. A cause-and-effect relationship lurks unrecognized in the witches'division of the spoils: since Macbeth will seize a paternal identity that does not belong to him hereditarily, he will be forbidden to father a lineal successor. The prophecy that confronts Macbeth is therefore an Oedipal
prophecy—specifically, a warning about filial rebellion and the castration that avenges it—as Lévi-Strauss argues all riddles are.\textsuperscript{31} Such a riddle tempts man toward the fatal violation it describes, sends him in pursuit of self-destruction through a desperate and deluded attempt at self-preservation. The "paradoxical impression that Macbeth gives of being morally responsible for his own destruction even though he is so heavily fated to destroy himself that the lines of his destiny can be read by prophecy"\textsuperscript{32} may be partly resolved by recognizing the unwitting act of choice that invites his fated barrenness. His fatal error, like that of Oedipus, is a failure to notice the cautionary aspect of the prophecies affixed to the gloriously inciting aspect; the contrastingly cautious Banquo avoids that Oedipal (and figuratively castrating) mistake. Banquo, the acknowledged enemy of Macbeth's "genius" or generative force (3.1.48-69), may safely partake of the crown by growing into it through generation rather than transforming himself forcibly into a figure of royal stature. As Edward Forset wrote in the same year that Shakespeare wrote \textit{Macbeth}, "when wee be disposed to alter any thing, we must let it grow by degrees, and not hast it on too suddenly."\textsuperscript{33} The flesh of Banquo's flesh eventually grows into the kingly robes that hang so loosely on Macbeth's artificial person.

Lady Macbeth is quicker than her husband to recognize that murdering Duncan will entail murdering the procreative order. The fisher-king Duncan basks in the natural fecundity that he half-perceives and half-creates in the couple's home. Banquo explains Duncan's enjoyment of this castle in suggestive terms:

\begin{quote}
This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,
By his lov'd mansionry, that the heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here; no jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made his pendant bed and procreant cradle.
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observ'd
The air is delicate.
\end{quote}

(1.6.3-10)

Just as Lady Macbeth has already begun replacing this martlet with a raven, and the domesticated jutties with battlements (1.5.38-40), so has she begun to replace this nurturant sexuality with its antithesis. Her plea that the spirits "unsex me," according to a recent study, contains a specific request that her menstrual cycle be intermitted:\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{quote}
Make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose.
\end{quote}

(1.5.43-46)

Even her request that the spirits "take my milk for gall" suggests that the reborn Macbeth (like the reborn Coriolanus) can be nurtured into life only by fluids opposite to "the milk of human kindness" by which he was originally formed and fed (1.5.48, 17).

Freud understood this couple's loss of progeny as essentially such a rash wish, a barren instruction returning to plague the inventors: "It would be a perfect example of poetic justice in the manner of the talion if the childlessness of Macbeth and the barrenness of his Lady were the punishment for their crimes against the sanctity of geniture."\textsuperscript{35} The inconsistencies concerning Lady Macbeth's children, despite L. C. Knights's famous argument, actually makes Freud's point all the more convincing.\textsuperscript{36} If the children were concretely presented to us, Shakespeare would be obliged to provide a literal cause for their parents'poetically just lack of
an heir. That would likely both alter the polarity of our sympathies and conceal the important symbolic cause behind a crudely physical efficient cause. This is opportunism on Shakespeare's part of the sort Knights describes, where the play works as something other than a realistic story, but if (as Knights urges) we ignore the apparent disappearance of the children, if we refuse to think of Lady Macbeth as a procreative creature, then we lose the moral import of that disappearance. Macduff's reasons for abandoning his family to slaughter remain somewhat unclear, perhaps for some didactic purpose. By including only the comment that this Caesarean figure "wants the natural touch" (4.2.9), Shakespeare suggests that the products of disordered procreation are deprived of heirs by a jealous natural order. Since it requires Duncan's death, Macbeth's royal rebirth thriftlessly ravins up his own life's means (2.4.28-29); since Caesarean operations were virtually always fatal to the mother in the Renaissance, Macduff's birth entails the same unwitting offense. By refusing us a complete factual explanation for either man's loss of progeny, Shakespeare focuses our attention on the defect they share and the nemesis it provokes.

This shared unnaturalness and childlessness enables Macduff to cure the disease that threatens the nation's procreative health. Macbeth's crimes against Malcolm's "due of birth" and against "nature's germains" in general have blighted Scotland's fertility (3.6.25; 4.1.59). The threatened kingdom is, as Macduff says, truly a threatened "birthdom" (4.3.4). In reply, Malcolm portrays himself as merely another agent of that blight, a creature of indiscriminate lust in conceiving children, and hardly better than Lady Macbeth in nursing them thereafter: he will "Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell" (4.3.98). This causes Macduff to wonder whether there can be any hope for Scotland's regeneration.

Since that the truest issue of thy throne
By his own interdiction stands accus'd
And does blaspheme his breed? Thy royal father
Was a most sainted king; the queen that bore thee,
Offner upon her knees than on her feet,
Died every day she liv'd.

(4.3.106-11)

What this speech emphasizes is generational continuity: Malcolm's royal virtues should follow from his hereditary rights, almost as if orderly succession were virtue itself. The quality Macduff eulogizes in Malcolm's mother is her daily exchange of death and life, a pattern associative with the regenerative virtues of sleep, "The death of each day's life" as it is called at the time of Duncan's murder (2.2.37). This figuratively posthumous mother merges with Macduff's literal one into the notion of Scotland as such a mother:

Alas, poor country,
Almost afraid to know itself! It cannot
Be call'd our mother, but our grave; where nothing,
But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile.

(4.3.164-67)

Macbeth's Caesarean rebirth has infected the entire nation with his nullified and self-alienated condition, and precludes any more natural births in the future. "Cruel are the times when we are traitors, / And do not know ourselves," the choral Rosse tells Lady Macduff moments before she and her babes are slaughtered (4.2.18-19). Disruptions of succession converted individual mothers and the mother-country into tombs in Richard III (4.1.53; 4.4.138, 423) and Richard II (2.1.51, 83), and now the same transaction threatens Scotland's future.
But eventually Scotland, like Macduff, is rescued from the dead maternal womb and begins a new generation of life. Macduff’s role as the spearhead of this vengeful revival becomes an emblem of the fact that Macbeth is destroyed by the unlineal, unnatural provenance of his own royal identity. Macbeth is able to achieve his bloody rebirth only by performing a regicide; Macduff is able to perform his regicide, according to the prophecies, only because of his Caesarean origins. Macbeth is, in this sense, the fulfillment of Macbeth’s foolish wish to replace natural succession with abrupt violence. Macbeth again resembles Richard III, in serving as the sacrifice by which his nation restores its damaged lineal health, and Macduff is a suitable blade-wielding hierophant. When a society must purge a sin that has injured its fertility, it generally sacrifices a figure onto whom all the sin is projected, often a temporary mock-king; the executioner is generally a liminal figure who partly reflects or partly contracts the victim’s particular taint. 39

A group of paradoxically mighty infants resume the process of generation as Macbeth’s enemies. 40 From the corrupt jumble of nature’s germain’s in the witches’cauldron arise miraculously two such symbols of procreation’s determination to survive and destroy the barren tyrant. The crowned babe, suggesting the rightful heir Malcolm, and the bloody babe, suggesting the Caesarean child Macduff, represent several things on other levels: the inheriting children Macbeth cannot have, the potential heirs Macbeth has sought to kill, the Oedipal children who typically abuse the father who was himself an Oedipal criminal, and the wounded regenerative order as a whole. 41 For Macbeth as for Richard III, the failure to eradicate all such heirs, and relatedly the failure to terminate all such cycles, generates a nemesis that returns to destroy him. As in Greek and Christian myths, at least one heir escapes the tyrant’s defensive Slaughter of the Innocents, and the army that defeats Macbeth consists of “Siward’s son, / And many unrough youths that even now / Protest their first of manhood” (5.2.9-11). Once again Macbeth has succeeded only in interrupting a cycle he sought to override completely, and when it resumes he finds himself trapped in an unnatural generational isolation (5.3.24-26), with no child of his own to succeed him. . . .

Notes


21 Ibid., p. 221; see also his p. 225.


26 Eric Partridge, Shakespeare’s Bawdy (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), mentions some examples in his entries under “act” (p. 56) and “do it” (p. 95).

27 The Oedipal character of the crime is suggested in other, more allusive ways, mostly by the guilty couple themselves. On the night of the regicide (2.2), Lady Macbeth is almost paralyzed by Duncan’s resemblance to her father, and by the typical Oedipal fear that “Th’attempt and not the deed / Confounds us”; she then warns her brooding husband as Jocasta warned hers: “Consider it not so deeply” (2.2.9-29). But Macbeth, reading his sins in his palms, cries out, “What hands are here? Hah! They pluck out mine eyes”; “To know my deed,” he adds, “twere best not know myself,” which is at least as true for Oedipus as it is for Macbeth. The witches
also resemble Jocasta in admonishing Macbeth to "Seek to know no more" about the riddling prophecy by which he rose to power, and the ominous prophecy, linked in unspoken ways to the first one, by which he is fated to fall. When he insists on and receives an answer, he finds it "does sear mine eyeballs" (4.1.103-13). Macbeth is thus well-suited to teach Scotland's young men "What'twere to kill a father" (3.6.3-20).


33 Edward Forset, _A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politique_ (London, 1606), p. 64.

34 La Belle, in _Shakespeare Quarterly_ 31: 381-386; as she points out, this disruption of the menstrual flow "is tantamount to murdering infants—albeit unborn," and thus "destroys the lineal flow," making Lady Macbeth analogous to Rosse's Scotland, not the mother of a new generation but instead its grave. The rebirth of Macbeth, then, entails a biological event that reveals how opposed ambitious alterations are to natural fertility.


37 Wilbur Sanders, _The Dramatist and the Received Idea_ (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 263, describes Macduff's responsibility for his own loss of family as unmistakable yet oddly undefined. Holland, _Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare_, p. 222, reports one psychoanalytic reading in which "Macduff proves again, in the logic of the unconscious, that the bad son makes a bad father."


39 For a discussion of such sacrificial practices, particularly as they relate to tragedy, see René Girard, _Violence and the Sacred_, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), passim. Macduff may also serve as society's pristine agent against the threat of Oedipal rebirth embodied by Macbeth. Victor Calef, "Lady Macbeth and Infanticide," _Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association_ 17 (1969), 537 n. 10, points out that his Caesarean birth leaves Macduff miraculously free from the taint of having entered his mother's genital passages even once. See also Holland, _Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare_, p. 227.

H. R. Coursen (essay date 1985)


[Here, Coursen adopts the analytic psychology of C. G. Jung to explore Shakespeare's characterizations of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. He argues that Jungian theory illuminates the conflict between them by explicating their dominant orientations, the interaction of their conscious and unconscious purposes, and the fixed order of the dramatic world they inhabit.]

At the Shakespeare Association Meeting in San Francisco in 1979, after I had presented a paper on Jungian Approaches to King Lear, C. L. Barber asked me, "Why Jung, and not Freud?" This essay is an answer to Joe's question. I have no wish to exclude Freud, and could not even if I wished to. I do wish to suggest "Why Jung?"

It is safe to say that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth do not interact positively or productively with each other. I hope to suggest, from a Jungian perspective, some of the reasons for the destruction they wreak upon each other and upon their marriage. Since their personal disaster is not a single doom, but has implications that "Strike heaven in the face" (4.3.6), I shall suggest, further, how the Jungian approach allows us to define these characters in the context of the world they inhabit, a world obviously not our own. I shall suggest how the world-view of Macbeth renders more than merely a "domestic tragedy."

Since A. C. Bradley's magnificent essay on Macbeth, it has been a critical commonplace that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth "exchange characteristics" as the play progresses. The early Macbeth, suffering a nervous breakdown as he completes the "terrible feat" (1.7.81) of murdering Duncan, and waxing hyperbolic about the blood on his hands, hardens into the tyrant wading through his sea of blood (3.4.135-37). The early Lady Macbeth, ruthlessly efficient in her command of the details of regicide, softens into the sleepwalker of Act 5, projecting endless spots of blood onto her "little hand" (5.1.48) from the endless reel of her guilt. As Bradley says, "the development of her character—perhaps it would be more strictly accurate to say, the change in her state of mind—is both inevitable and the opposite of the development we traced in Macbeth."

While I believe that we would all share Bradley's thesis of "inevitability" in the case of Lady Macbeth, my purpose here is to explore the "opposite development" of the two chief characters via Jung's description of personality types. The "exchange of characteristics" is hardly as clear-cut as I suggested above, so it will be necessary for me to pause at times to observe nuances in the overall movements of these two characters through their play.

The advantage of the Jungian approach is that Jung describes the "attitude of consciousness" characteristic of a basic psychological orientation, and also posits the compensatory and opposite attitude of the unconscious. The give-and-take between a defined mode of consciousness and the specifically postulated response of the unconscious is a constant of Shakespeare's more complete characterizations. Those extraverted kings, Henry IV and Henry V, for example, suffer invasions from their repressed feelings, each attack characterized by a
sleepless exploration of the emptiness of the goals that extraversion has achieved. The Jungian approach explains the dynamic of *change* in a character, as repressed elements surface, and defines the inevitable patterns within which change will manifest itself. Beyond whatever I do here, however, resides the ineluctable mystery of Shakespearean characterization.

Writing about "Marriage as a Psychological Relationship," Jung says that "Nature is aristocratic. The normal man is a fiction, although certain generally valid laws do exist." Dramatic characters are also a fiction, of course, but the Jungian abstraction can assist us in exploring the mysterious "reality" that resonates from Shakespeare's characters.

Jung isolates two dominant orientations: the extravert and the introvert. The extravert, says Jung, is "object oriented": his "attitude is characterized by the subject's subordination to the demands which the object makes upon him." The introverted attitude is characterized by the subject's assertion of his conscious intentions and aims against the demands of the object. The popular distinction between the "other-directed" and the "inner-directed" person applies fairly accurately to Jung's distinction between extraversion and introversion.

To the two basic orientations, Jung adds four functions, the functions being the primary mode in which individual extraversion or introversion is conducted. They are: the two evaluative functions of thinking and feeling, and the two perceptive functions of intuition and sensation. Each of these functions inheres in human beings, of course. Sensation tells us "that something is" thinking tells us what a thing is. Feeling "implies an evaluation" (and thus must be distinguished from "sensation"). Intuition is "perception of the possibilities inherent in a situation" (Jung's ital.).

One function, however, dominates in each individual. This "superior function is always an expression of conscious personality, of its aims, will and general performance." The primary function, then, corresponds to what Jung calls the "persona," or self-selected "image." Prince Hal, for example, is an extravert, a fact that accounts both for his ability to roister with Falstaff, in Hal's effective version of "negative public relations," and for his apostrophe to the crown in *II Henry IV*. In each case the crown is the object that draws Hal's energy, as he knows it has extracted the energy of his extraverted father. In spite of self-conscious "image-making," however, the individual remains unaware of the compensatory power of subordinate functions "opposed to the conscious aims, even producing effects whose cause is a complete enigma to the individual." Jung describes conscious orientation, rather than its inevitable and compensatory opposite, but Shakespeare makes us aware of that opposite. Thus the extraverted thinker, Henry V, discovers before Agincourt a powerful tide of introverted feeling; or, perhaps it discovers him, as the driving extravert must pause to consider the personal implications of his successful politics: "O ceremony, show me but thy worth!" (4.1.241).

Through Jung's description of psychological types, we gain some sense of the "phenomenology" of Shakespeare's characters, of the way in which the character works within itself, as conscious aims and unconscious forces interact. We also grasp how the plays work as interactions of characters, as a collision of attitudes emerges from different orientations and functions. Desdemona (extraverted intuition) and Othello (introverted sensation) are uniquely susceptible to the misunderstanding fomented by the extraverted thinker, Iago. The psychological type responds to other types out of an inner nature of which he or she is unconscious, because it is the unconscious.

The complex emotional issues of *Hamlet* serve to illustrate the point. That Gertrude represents extraverted feeling helps to account, beyond oedipal considerations, for the response of the introverted thinker, Hamlet, to her, and for his hatred of the woman-in-him. That woman, the "anima" in man's androgynous nature would compensate for Hamlet's conscious orientation if he could accept that aspect of his psyche. For Hamlet, conditioned to know woman only in the image of his mother, the anima is repressed. Hamlet's androgyny becomes a stereotypical "not-me" to be sneered at: "It is but foolery, but it is such a kind of gain-giving, as
would perhaps trouble a woman" (5.2.213-14). Hamlet's perception of his mother's example and his consequent repression of his anima forces him to reject his feelings, in this case, his evaluation of the duel. Misogyny prohibits androgyny. He falls into the trap that awaits the male consciousness, or ego, that is informed primarily by thinking: "thinking makes it so" (2.2.251). Hamlet berates himself when his thinking is challenged from within, when feeling wells up and overwhelms conscious orientation. His introverted thinking produces an explosion of extraverted feeling that, typically, indicts "the subject": "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (2.2.550). The pressure to do more with a function than can be done activates the qualities he hates, those of extraverted feeling embodied in his whore-mother. Hamlet castigates himself accurately for assuming the precise stereotype predicated by his repression of the more general and deeply compensatory powers of the anima: "I . . . Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words, / And fall a-cursing, like a very drab, / A stallion" (F. "scullion": 2.2.584-88). Hamlet describes what he is doing, and compensates for inaction by telling us all that he should be doing, as his repressed extraverted feeling leaps inevitably to hyperbole. Many of the seeming inconsistencies of Hamlet's character are explicable when we realize that his "shadow" qualities, those repressed by conscious orientation, will leap out when the introverted thinker is under intense pressure. Such explosions occur when Hamlet encounters the Ghost, and when Hamlet breaks up what might have been his masterstroke—the play-within-the-play. That moment, certainly, incorporates the oedipal conflict; it is part of a specific syndrome that blocks Hamlet from psychic integration, that makes him "tragic." The shadow is the anti-type, or alter ego, the primitive personality created unconsciously by consciousness. Gertrude, extraverted feeling, can see nothing wrong (other than "o'er" hastiness: 2.2.57) in her marriage to her dead husband's brother. Hamlet, introverted thinking, can find nothing right in it, save sound economic policy ("Thrift, thrift, Horatio!": 1.2.180). But Hamlet does not recognize that his mother is, in a sense, his shadow, and some of the hasty things he does will escape his own condemnation. As with critics and spectators, different orientations will render different evaluations of the same event, be that event a marriage within a play, or the play itself.

Initially, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth represent opposite orientations, introversion and extraversion. They express even their common goal—the crown—with opposite vectors of energy. Lady Macbeth perceives it in the extraverted, external way, as "the golden round" (1.5.28), "solely sovereign sway and masterdom" (1.5.70), and "the ornament of life" (1.7.42). Macbeth senses it within himself, as "Vaulting ambition" (1.7.27). Macbeth, the introvert, responds to the effect that his potential action has on him:

\[
\ldots \text{why do I yield to that suggestion} \\
\text{Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,} \\
\text{And make my seated heart knock at my ribs} \\
\text{Against the use of nature?}
\]

(1.3.134-37)

A "thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical" activates interior content into "horrible imaginings" (1.3.138-39). Macbeth may express his contemplation as "thought"—it is the available term—but he is responding with interior sensations for which no terms exist. His is to be "A deed without a name" (4.1.49). As Dr. Johnson, paraphrasing Macbeth's lines, suggests: "All powers of action are oppressed and crushed by one overwhelming image in the mind. \ldots Of things now about me I have no perception, being intent wholly on that which has no existence."

For the introvert, however, interior content—the action of the object (murdering the king) upon the subject (Macbeth)—is "existence."

Parallel passages demonstrate the fundamentally different orientations of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth:

*M. Macbeth.* Stars hide your fires!  
Let not light see my black and deep desires;  
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see

(1.4.50-53)

*Lady Macbeth.* Come, thick Night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,
That my keen knife sees not the wound it makes,
Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry,'Hold, hold!'

(1.5.50-54)

Both wish to avoid detection by any revealing light—as if God's vision of His world could be momentarily veiled. But Macbeth would wish to say with multiple-murderer John Wayne Gacy, "The body probably did it, but the mind doesn't know it." Macbeth's emphasis is on his inner desires and their attendant fears. Lady Macbeth does not consider it so deeply; she merely fears prevention of the act by some outside agency. She does not sense, as Macbeth does, that that agency is coded into her deepest individuality.

The distinction between the two can be grasped via one of those echoes that Shakespeare creates within the sounding chambers of this play. Macbeth remarks his personal response to a murder not yet committed; it "doth unfix [his] hair" (1.3.135). Lady Macbeth calls on external powers to "unsex [her] here" (1.5.41), so that the murder can be committed.

Lady Macbeth represents a complex example of what Jung calls extraverted thinking, one of the few women in Shakespeare who belongs to that type. Portia, in *The Merchant of Venice,* is another; she actually assumes the male role, and in a far more "macho" manner than do Rosalind or Viola. Extraverted thinkers are usually men, and, in Shakespeare, they include Richard III, Bolingbroke, Hal-Henry V, Claudius, Vincendo, Iago, and the early King Lear. From that list it should be clear that elements other than "generally valid laws" of psychological orientation pertain to Shakespeare's characterization.

As she utters her invocation to "thick Night," Lady Macbeth is putting herself through a kind of "conscious repression," a process perhaps psychologically impossible, since repression is an unconscious activity, but one that Shakespeare dramatizes for us in soliloquy. Lady Macbeth fears interior content as the extravert does. What is inside Macbeth and possibly inside her might prove a barrier between them and the external goal. Therefore is Macbeth's "human kindness" to be feared (1.5.16). His moral scruples are to be chastized as impediments to "the golden round" (1.5.27-28). Her "woman's milk" is to be transformed to "gall" (1.5.48), her being unsexed. The object dictates the necessity—a perversion of the natural, a debasement of humanity, an attempt to warp cosmic verities into the narrow patterning of individual will. As she perceives it, attainment of the objective goal is worth any price. Her own words signal the irony—any temporary victory must occur within a deeper defeat. As Jung says of the extraverted thinker: "If the attitude is extreme, all personal considerations are lost sight of, even those affecting the subject's own person." Lady Macbeth does not ignore personal considerations; she would demolish them.

Her activity, however, is typical of Shakespeare's extraverts, if more extreme. Successful Claudius, who would also suspend the "way things are" for the time being, finds his murder returned to confront him. Successful Henry IV and Henry V suffer an insomnia that is the reflex of the "total consciousness" that their version of kingship has demanded. All-powerful King Lear tumbles into his own inner storm. Richard III is haunted before Bosworth Field by a spiritual reality he had laughed to scorn. One of the most frightening aspects of Iago is that he, apparently, suffers no such attack. Lady Macbeth's repression has long been obvious to critics, and is not the product of modern psychological approaches to her character. Dowden, writing in 1872, says, "Lady Macbeth gains, for the time, sufficient strength by throwing herself passionately into a single purpose, and by resolutely repressing all that is inconsistent with that purpose."
Here is a "resolute" repression. She provides Macbeth with the extraverted formula that will conceal the inner sensations that work "strange matters" (1.5.63) onto his countenance. To achieve conscious intention one must create a persona:

To beguile the time,
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue: look like th'innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't.

(1.5.63-66)

But—as the allusion to Eden suggests—Time, that powerful rhythm of the supernature, will not be beguiled by a "false face" that hides "What the false heart doth know" (1.7.83). For Macbeth, the heart is the heart of the matter. Lady Macbeth believes—or affects to believe—that interior content can be erased quite easily, as if by some behaviorist experiment in brainwashing:

[Duncan's] two chamberlains
Will I with wine and wassail so convince,
That memory, the warder of the brain,
Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason
A limbec only.

(1.7.64-68)

Much later, Macbeth will pose a question to which she had so easily given such a positivistic answer earlier:

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff d bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?

(5.3.40-45)

As in Othello, however, the results of psychic poisoning are more lingering and profound than are the effects of alcohol. To employ "wassail," the toast of Christmas celebration, as a means to kill a Christian king, and to believe that water is a total solvent, is to open the bosom to more perilous and ineradicable stuff. At that later moment, of course, Macbeth himself has long since yielded to "suggestion." The second set of prophecies already looms on the horizon before Dunsinane. They have been invited, as it were, by Macbeth's willingness to accept the meaning of the surface, by his inability to perceive the "inner sense" that was his early dominant. Lady Macbeth is yielding to that long-repressed set of inner images.

The early Macbeth is aware that "prophetic greeting" (1.3.78), or prophecy, does not compel: "If Chance will have me King, why Chance may crown me / Without my stir" (1.3.144-45). The problem, however, is that he enunciates a pagan theory of fatality, seems to dismiss his own ability to make decisions, and thus ignores the ultimate issue of his actions. In a fallen world that issue is the possible damnation of his soul. Macbeth encourages within himself the confusion engendered by a world that is only apparently ambiguous. Macbeth presents us, and its characters, with perhaps the most paradigmatic "world picture" in all of Shakespeare. Banquo, of course, sees the Weird Sisters not as handmaidens of "Chance," but as "instruments of darkness [who] tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles, to betray's / In deepest consequence" (1.3.124-26). The world
of *King Lear* may allow us to debate the issue of whether nature is the vesture of a purposive cosmos or a collision of blind forces that impact upon good and evil without distinction. The world of *Macbeth* does not permit that debate. Even "disorder" in *Macbeth* is a distortion of a more comprehensive positive pattern, in a Miltonic sense. In *Macbeth* we experience disorder as it violates the *a priori* cosmic law, whether mousing owls soar to downfalcons, or horses contend "gainst obedience" and issue forth as if to "make war on mankind" (2.4.12-18), rather than to bear man *into* war. In *King Lear* "the frame of the world" that defines and that is definitive does not exist. But it does in *Macbeth*.

As Banquo places a proper and negative valuation on the Weird Sisters, the former Thane of Cawdor puts a proper—and negative—value on his existential being. He "set forth / A deep repentance . . . / he died / As one that had been studied in his death, / To throw away the dearest thing he ow'd / As'twere a careless trifle" (1.4.6-11). Mindful of the eternal premises that pervade the visible world, Cawdor hopes that his repentance will have some efficacy in absolving him of his earthly treason. His final words may resemble those of the convicted Grey in *Henry V*: "My fault, but not my body, pardon, sovereign," to which Henry piously replies, "God quit you in his mercy!" (2.2.165-66). King Claudius reaches insights similar to those I attribute to Cawdor, but extraverted Claudius is trapped, even in his temporary introversion, by the objects his crime has gained him. Macbeth, the introvert, finds himself in a trap *before* the murder whereby he will gain the crown, a dilemma signalled by an inner perturbation to be reflected in nature as the murder occurs and during the regicide's reign. Macbeth is caught before the fact in a tug-of-war between his "corrupt will" and his "virtuous understanding," as Tillyard says. For all of his temporary and even willful misunderstanding, Macbeth knows what world he is in, and who he is in that world. His own nature keeps him informed of the macrocosmic and the microcosmic truth. Yet he persists in confusing that truth. The Weird Sisters, for example, do *not* solicit. "This supernatural soliciting" (1.3.130) occurs within Macbeth.

The world of *Macbeth* is "Augustinian." God is not merely the overseer of all events, but the "magister interior," the inner image of the "outer mystery." In Jungian terms, this inner imagery constitutes the basic archetype of the individual—the self. "The self," says Jung, "is a God-image, or at least cannot be distinguished from one. The self is not a substitute but a symbol for the deity." Macbeth's aside about "Chance," and his perception that the Weird Sisters "solicit," might suggest that he has already begun to alienate himself from the *a priori* nature of his world, and from the unique but also *a priori* nature of his selfhood. In pondering the murder, however, he achieves a kind of reintegration. He knows that no man can "jump the life to come" (1.7.7), and that a regicide faces retribution, just as King Claudius suffers it in the last scene of *Hamlet*: "this even-handed Justice / Commends th'ingredience of our poison'd chalice / To our own lips" (1.7.10-12). He knows that to murder Duncan is to violate the laws of kinship, homage, and hospitality. He knows that Duncan's clarity in office will, if he is murdered, elicit a personified "Pity" (1.7.21), to be bruited by all the messengers of Heaven into an outpouring that will dampen even the winds controlled by the instruments of darkness. He knows, then, that a principle inheres in nature greater than that represented by the Weird Sisters. Against the certainty of "deep damnation" (1.7.20), however, Macbeth senses the inner thrust of "Vaulting ambition" (1.7.27).

The introverted Macbeth rehearses for himself all the reasons why he should not murder Duncan, not merely on some intellectual level, but with an image-making imagination that approaches the experiential level. He senses the nature of his fall from grace before the fact. If, as Jung says of "introverted sensation," Macbeth "is guided by the intensity of the subjective sensation excited by the objective stimulus," he is caught between the vivid sensations of cosmic outrage and his inner sensation of ambition. Macbeth would evade this dilemma by dealing primarily with consequences, some personal, some political, some cosmic. He tends to obscure the deed itself and to evaluate the external results, however negative on all counts. "Ambition"—the first time that Macbeth mentions the motive he shares with Claudius (cf. *Hamlet*: 3.2.55)—seems to encourage in him a kind of extraversion, the establishment of a relationship with a normative external world. Although his understanding of that relationship is total, and totally negative—as befits the introvert and as opposed to the specific, detailed, and dangerously "objective" plan Lady Macbeth is working out—Macbeth
has begun to swing towards his wife's orientation. At the moment that he senses ambition's leap within him, she enters. He gives her an extraverted reason for not pursuing the murder:

We will proceed no further in this business:
He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon.

(1.7.31-35)

Perhaps the best way to understand the "confrontation scene"—the climax of Macbeth is to pause to listen to what Jung says about the inevitable misunderstanding that must occur between the introvert and the extravert:

The introvert interposes a subjective view between the perception of the object and his own action, which prevents the action from fitting the objective situation. Although the introverted consciousness is naturally aware of external conditions, it selects the subjective determinants as the decisive ones. It is therefore oriented by the factor in perception and cognition which responds to the sense stimulus in accordance to the individual's subjective disposition [cf. Macbeth's "the disposition that I owe": 3.4.112]. Whereas the extravert constantly appeals to what comes to him from the object, the introvert relies principally on what the sense impression constellates in the subject. We must not forget—although the extravert is only too prone to do so—that perception and cognition are not purely objective, but are also subjectively conditioned. The world exists not merely in itself, but also as it appears to me. By overvaluing our capacity for objective cognition we repress the importance of the subjective factor. The subjective factor has all the value of a codeterminant of the world we live in, a factor that can on no account be left out of our calculations. It remains an enigma to the extravert how a subjective standpoint can be superior to the objective situation [cf. Lady Macbeth's "They have made themselves, and that their fitness now / Does unmake you": 1.7.53-54]. Faced with this prejudice the introvert is usually at a loss for the right argument, for he is quite unaware of the unconscious but generally quite valid assumptions on which his subjective judgment and his subjective assumptions are based.25

Shakespeare, of course, dramatizes Macbeth's "quite valid assumptions" for us via Macbeth's aside and soliloquies. But they hold no ground against Lady Macbeth's attack. Her consciousness, in turn, will be incapable of holding out against her failure to accept "subjectivity" as a "co-determinant of the world we live in." It follows that, as Jung suggests of the introverted sensation type, Macbeth "easily becomes a victim of the aggressiveness and domineeringness of others."26 It is a trait he shares with another introverted warrior, Othello. Not only is Macbeth, as Jung suggests of the introverted sensation type, "wholly incapable of adequately reproducing his subjective perceptions"27—except as he remarks them in his asides and soliloquies—but, by offering any reason at all to Lady Macbeth, he seems to invite manipulation. He gives a good reason, insofar as he would counter her orientation—I'm doing well now, why risk current success? But it is not his reason—to kill Duncan would be wrong. And to offer a materialistic reason for not pursuing a greater material goal is to open oneself up for counterattack, to be forced into what Jung calls the "overcredulous attitude of consciousness" of the introverted sensation type28 (cf.1.7.75-78).

The confrontation scene establishes Lady Macbeth's extraverted thinking, as Jung suggests of this type:

The self-assertion of the personality is transferred to the formula [i.e. the murder of Duncan achieves "solely sovereign sway and masterdom"]. The formula gains such an ascendancy that all other possible standpoints are thrust into the background. It usurps the place of all
more general, less definite, more modest and therefore more truthful views of life. It even supplants the general view of life we call religion. Thus the formula becomes a religion, although in essentials it has not the slightest connection with anything religious. It assumes the essentially religious quality of absoluteness. . . . One could call this kind of judgement *predicative*. It is never absolutely depreciative or destructive, since it always substitutes a fresh value for the one destroyed.  

In this case, however, what is destroyed will destroy Lady Macbeth's predicate of power. Of such a psychological type, Jung suggests that "personal sympathy with others must . . . suffer unless they too happen to espouse the same ideal. . . . Anything new that is not already contained in [the] formula is seen through a veil of unconscious hatred and condemned accordingly. . . . The critic is demolished, if possible with personal invective, and no argument is too gross to be used against him." Such a person, says Jung, tends "to construe any opposition to [the] formula as personal ill-will." Perhaps one can glimpse from this description the psychological affinity between the King Lear of the "love test" and the Lady Macbeth of the confrontation scene.

Shakespeare creates a role reversal in *Macbeth*. The woman does not correspond to the stereotype, the superficial norm to which the "nature" of the play, as represented by Macduff, appeals. Macduff's assumptions about stereotypes are being challenged even as he responds to Lady Macbeth's demand to know what has happened:

O gentle lady,  
'Tis not for you to hear what I can speak:  
The repetition in a woman's ear,  
Would murther as it fell.

(2.3.80-83)

His lines anticipate, of course, the murdering words that Ross will drive into his ear, and they anticipate the destructive repetition that Lady Macbeth will suffer.

In her dealings with Macbeth, she has been dynamic, absolute, and scornful of his hesitancy. The "animus," or "male minority in woman," emerges in its biting, opinionated, and "rationalizing" manner, producing an inevitable "anima" reaction from Macbeth, that is, activating his "female minority." His own weak "feminine content"—weak because unconscious, hence unintegrated into his personality—considers failure (1.7.59). We experience an all-too-typical husband and wife argument, but one that intersects cosmic coordinates. As Jung explains in "Marriage as a Psychological Relationship":

Just as the animus projection of a woman can often pick on a man of real significance . . . and can actually help him to achieve his true destiny with her moral support, so a man can create for himself a *femme inspiratrice* by his anima projection.

Lady Macbeth's grasp of Macbeth's "true destiny" emerges from an opinionated absolutism that ignores deeper absolutes—the *a priori* premises of the world of the play and of personality within that given world. Her "victory" is based on the shallowest of psychological grounding: her unconscious "maleness" has forced Macbeth into the stereotypical role of yielding female. He *may* see her as "inspiration." Certainly he acknowledges the power of animus when he says, "Bring forth menchildren only! / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" (1.7.73-75). His punning suggests that he has slipped into the linguistic duplicity that characterizes Lady Macbeth's diction and that will victimize Macbeth as he seizes the reassuring surface of the second set of prophecies. He recognizes here, however, that his own soul, or anima, though driven to acquiescence by Lady Macbeth's virility, is not committed to the deed: "I am settled, and bend up /
Each *corporal* agent to this terrible feat" (1.7.80-81). He perceives the deed in its true nature, but he will walk through it physically, as if his own nature were not there. He permits a forced extraversion that contradicts what he knows to be his inner nature.

As Jung suggests of the unconscious exchange of masculine and feminine energies inherent in the anima/animus conflict, the results "often turn out to be an illusion with destructive consequences . . . blinding fantasies and the likelihood of most absurd aberrations."36 Anything decided on the basis of this conflict is predicated upon the illusion of "consciousness," or, to put it another way, unperceived energies dictate the decision. Lady Macbeth combats Macbeth's barely articulated scruples with a male ferocity:

*Macbeth.* Pr'ythee, peace.
I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.

*Lady Macbeth.* What beast was't then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And, to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man.

(1.7.45-51)

While Lady Macbeth claims to know what manhood is, Macbeth is correct. To "do more" in this world is to descend nature's hierarchy, and to become—unbecomingly—very like a beast, as Act 5 suggests Macbeth does become. Macbeth's initial argument about "golden opinions" has opened him up to a manipulation that views gold as the argument. His assertion about manhood and its proper limits comes too late in the debate.

In spite of her "masculine" vehemence, Lady Macbeth must also employ her woman's weapons. She would deny her husband her sexual favors, and she would indulge in the most heinous action she can think of—infanticide—had she vowed as Macbeth has done (1.7.54-59). As Coleridge says, "Had she regarded [the murder of the sucking infant] with savage indifference, there would have been no force in her appeal."37 The actress at this point might moderate towards tenderness to render her conclusion more dynamic. Suffice it that Lady Macbeth has hardly been "unsexed." Her feminine self emerges vividly through the most inhuman moments of her conviction. That energy is part of her conviction, of course, but it will exact a frightful retribution once interior content—or self-hood—marshalls *against* what consciousness has done. She will pay for what Jungian analyst, June Singer, calls "the hubris of consciousness."38 This modern version of the ancient violation of the zone of the gods is typical of the extraverted thinker. Lady Macbeth, of course, violates the zone of God, an infinite space that also exists within her.

She has attempted a kind of exorcism of her own humanity, and has coerced Macbeth towards an act that he accepts on the most superficial of premises. His repression, therefore, remains close to the surface, and releases itself in vivid imaginings. His senses are "appall[ed]" (2.2.57) and will remain "pester'd" (5.2.23) off and on throughout the play. He is "afraid to think" what he has done, and will not look on it again (2.2.50-51). Thinking, as Macbeth engages in it, activates terrifying inner sensations. No wonder that Macbeth must now be afraid of his human functions. His function" had been "smother'd in surmise" (1.3.141), as interior content prohibited external action. Now, having murdered Duncan, he finds that surmise smothers function. His human capacity must yield to "terrible dreams" (3.2.18). Like Claudius, he would pray, but "Amen" sticks in his throat (2.2.31-32). Macbeth is, in a sense, the first murderer, therefore he is "th'best o'th'cut-throats" (3.4.16), having done the deed, as he senses it, to one of the organs whereby man's constant contact with God can be expressed. Macbeth experiences immediately what Lady Macbeth will know later, as St. Bernard suggests:
False to its own nature, which is to be a divine analogue [the soul] ceases at one and the same time to resemble God and to resemble itself. . . . Now, conscious of what it is in itself, it can ignore neither its own remaining and inherent capacity for greatness, nor the cruel loss of that greatness of which it is naturally capable. In other words it feels itself both alike to God and faithful to itself inasmuch as its aptitude for divine things subsists, but at the same time false both to God and its own true nature; and hence it is rent in twain and feeling itself still like and seeing itself in part unlike, it conceives that horror of self which is the inner tragedy of the sinner's life.  

Jung, discussing the extraverted thinker, provides a modern gloss on this passage that will pertain to the later Lady Macbeth: "The first function to be affected by . . . conscious inhibition is feeling, since it is the most opposed to the rigid intellectual formula and is therefore repressed the most intensely. No function can be entirely eliminated—it can only be greatly distorted." In different ways, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth inflict distortion upon themselves; therein lies their inner tragedy.

I do not believe that this play can be written off as some version of the struggles that modern man and woman encounter in the "corporate world"—the Mary McCarthy thesis. Shakespeare does more than merely demonstrate the breakdown of yet another marriage. He develops a pattern with which we may be familiar, showing a husband and wife entangling themselves in self-woven webs of misunderstanding. But he goes further, showing us, as Dover Wilson says, "a gigantic reflection of our sinful selves thrown upon the immeasurable screen of the universe." The failure of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to understand themselves is central to their tragedy. It is a tragedy, however, because of the world in which they act, a world of which Macbeth and, in her way, Lady Macbeth have full knowledge before they act. Similar failures in our world doom us in diminished ways. Each of us, however, can experience that "inner tragedy" we experience in each of the Macbeth's. Each of us can experience the failure of their "relationships." We discover ourselves as their failure resonates from the stage to where we are—guilty creatures sitting at a play. But their existential failure is only one of the powerful emotional realities to which this play demands our response.

Notes


3 Shakespearean Tragedy (London, 1904), pp. 331-400.

4 Bradley, p. 374.


8Portable Jung, p. 190. Collected Works, vol. 6, Psychological Types, Part 1. Subsequent quotations of Jung, except where noted, will emerge from the substantial portion of Psychological Types included in The Portable Jung.


10Portable Jung, p. 200.

11 For a discussion of the "anima," see Psychological Types, pp. 467-72.


14 At other moments, she expresses her awareness of "inner nature" only within requests that it be "blocked" from expression (cf. 1.5.40-50).

15 Jung labels such a process "conscious inhibition." Portable Jung, p. 200.

16Portable Jung, p. 201.


19 The word, in Shakespeare, tends to mean "carouse," as in Hamlet's "keeps wassail" (1.4.9) referring to Claudius, and Octavius's "lacivious wassails" (Antony and Cleopatra: 1.4.57) referring to Antony. Berowne seems to give the word a strictly secular connotation in "He is wit's pedler, and retails his wares / At wakes and wassails, meetings, markets, fairs" (5.2.318-19).

20 See my discussion, which draws on many others, of the issue of "world-view," in Christian Ritual and the World of Shakespeare's Tragedies (Lewisburg, Pa., 1976), pp. 314 ff. Macbeth, I believe, represents a coherent and consistent world-view, as opposed to King Lear, where "the nature of Nature" is one of the play's profound questions, and as opposed to; say, Titus Andronicus. The latter strikes me as a grabbag of "world-views," a syncretic medley that may emerge from an Ovidian vision of nature's interpenetration with humanity. I disagree to some extent with William Elton on King Lear. Cf. Christian Ritual, pp. 237-307.


24 One might argue that Macbeth's interior content represents "feeling," in that evaluations are involved, but Macbeth knows that content as imagery, that is, something perceived primarily by the senses, and "evaluated" by physical response.

25 Ibid., pp. 229-34.

26 Ibid., pp. 256-57.
Kay Stockholder (essay date 1987)


[In the essay that follows, Stockholder evaluates the dream-like atmosphere of the play and the way in which it represents the relation between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. She examines their love for each other and their unique intimacy in terms of their unconscious desires and the play's association of sexuality with violence.]

Plato in the Republic reflected uneasily that even a good man might dream that he slept with his mother, and Freud tried to reassure the audience to his Introductory Lectures to Psycho-Analysis when he reminded them that there was someone in the real world actually doing the horrible things of which they merely dreamed.1 The combination of the involuntary nature of our dreams and their emotional power can remain a source of worry even though most of us exempt from moral judgment the expressions of desires in the willless realm of dreaming. However, any action that ensues from a state of mind that seems on the borderline between waking and dreaming, any engulfing or compulsive emotion, raises troublesome questions about whether desires as well as actions are subject to moral judgment.
In literature a similar kind of question appears in the gulf between an aesthetic and moral apprehension, between the impulse to savour the formal beauty in which any kind of experience is rendered, and the impulse to come to literature, as Sydney suggested was appropriate, for delightful teaching. That there might be some kind of gulf between these two aspects of literature is implied by Freud and developed by Norman Holland, who in the Dynamics of Literary Response argued that the moral aspect of literature, by sublimating the core phantasy, allows us secretly to indulge, much as we do in dreaming, otherwise forbidden desire. The parallel dichotomies between dreaming and waking experience and between the aesthetic and moral aspects of art suggest that the dream level of art is not as easily integrated into the cognitive and rational aspects as Anton Ehrenzweig and other theorists suggest. Rather, it suggests that art contains an inherent internal conflict of a kind that Stephen Greenblatt saw in an historical context. It suggests that the moral aspect of art may be at odds with an amoral aesthetic apprehension in a way similar to traditional conflicts in religion between mystics and churchmen, or in love relations between romance and marriage. In all of these, the sense of oneself as a moral agent and some sense of a self-authenticating and unchosen immediacy, must live with each other, and may not be able to live without each other, but remain in uneasy tension. Life itself, in the gulf between dreaming and waking states, presents us with the most polarized version of this dichotomy, and even Plato, who by casting out the artists sought to preserve his republic from this kind of discord, recognized that he couldn't do away with dreams.

In art this tension between a moral and an appreciative mode appears in the polarity between the narrative content and the formal structuring of it. That is, the formal properties of art, those devices of structure and rhetoric that give a work a sense of internal coherence, a sense that the end is contained in and therefore flows inevitably from the beginning, generates an aesthetic stasis that counters the moral or ideological component that by definition assumes that things might have been otherwise. A work that makes this internal struggle particularly visible is Macbeth. It does so because it simultaneously maintains strongly moral concerns, and is also amongst the most dream-like of works.

Of Shakespeare's plays Macbeth is one of the most morally straightforward in that its condemnation of the evils of regicide and untoward ambition is unambiguous. But it is also one of the most puzzling, not only because of the preternatural events, but also because the dense poetry is generated by the protagonists as they themselves invoke the standards by which their actions are condemned. As a consequence the play's moral force, even as it is evoked, tends to be absorbed into the desire-laden atmosphere, producing a world so pervaded by compelling emotion that the protagonists seem to have little control over the forces that move them. This quality not only renders the action dreamlike, as others have noted, it coalesces with the formal ordering to challenge the moral ordering that it also incorporates. In dreams all detail of action, of the landscape with which the dreamer is surrounded, all that he encounters in his dream, expresses his emotional dynamic rather than the logic of ordinary causality. In Macbeth the language in which the protagonists anticipate their crime rises from and echoes in the language of other figures, both those that are dreamlike and those that are naturalistic. As a consequence these figures, while to a greater or lesser degree maintaining a sense of independent identity, also function as aspects of the protagonists'inner landscape. They become images writ large, part of what one critic has called a "subtextual wave." They merge with other images, as well as with the dense network of forebodings and premonitions, that resonate from one voice to another throughout the text. In this way the text adumbrates the dream-likeness of the protagonists'experience—Macbeth's encounter with the witches which leaves him feeling that "nothing is but what is not," his hallucinations, and Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking. The fluidity with which images of evil transform into action and characters, and actions and characters in turn generate images, creates patterns that highlight the sense of aesthetic inevitability. This strong sense of inevitability, that things could not be other than they are, becomes a metaphorical expression of the dream-like sense of external event being shaped by the protagonists' desires that have eluded their consciousness and will. The force of the desire from which events arise is at once so compelling to the protagonists and so inimical, not only to others'well-being, but any ordinary conception of their own, that it both arouses and negates a moral response.
In *Macbeth* the desire that moves the text is peculiarly intense because it is also that which defines the love between its protagonists, and the play is rendered more dream-like because the story of their love, which is not the overt subject of the play, structures the text. In dreams we do not expect the structuring principle, the force of desire and fear that generates the dream and is, as it were, its theme, to be visible, precisely because the dream is designed, as Freud tells us, to conceal that which it is designed to express. Similarly, *Macbeth* places in the centre of our vision a morally forceful story of untoward ambition, regicide, tyranny and the slaughter of children. But the text is structured by and its unique aura generated by the relation between Macbeth and his wife, who become like dream figures who encounter in the surrounding world representations of seemingly self-authenticating desires they do not experience directly. The combination of collusive intimacy and their violent action suggests people who are bound together by a perverse love, one that joins erotic passion to aggression and terror rather than to tenderness. The sexual overtones of the language surrounding the murder therefore express the lovers' erotically perverse passions. As in dreams, the accompanying fear and terror signify the distance between their desires and those that generate ordinary well being. That distance defines their love within an alternate reality, as dreams can seem to challenge the reality of our waking lives.

Since *Macbeth* is not a dream, but a play, and therefore must include what would be the latent content of dream within itself, one can more easily than in dreams reach into the shadows of the text and draw the figures into the centre of intellectual focus. As soon as one turns attention away from the play's moral and political issues, which obscure the love relation, it becomes clear that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are the most intimate of Shakespeare's lovers. They intuit each other's deepest feelings, are known to each other, and have a common enterprise. They fully rely on each other, and, most importantly, in sharing the same figurative language they contribute equally to the range of images that characterizes the play. They collude both in murdering Duncan, and in generating the images of guilty eroticism that characterize the text. Their collusion in murdering Duncan is so fine-tuned that neither is more responsible than the other. As a consequence, the murder rises from their relationship rather than from the character of either of them, neither of whom alone is portrayed as capable of it. As a single person's deed expresses the character of the person, or as a single character is defined by his or her actions and language, so the action that arises from a relationship characterizes that relationship. The action of the play, the planning, execution and consequences of the murder become extended images expressive of the emotions the protagonists generate in each other. The overt subject matter, while carrying its own import, also functions as a metaphorical expression of the emotional dynamic which constitutes the protagonists' relationship. That relationship generates the dream-like aura even while, and because, it remains in our peripheral vision rather than at the center of our attention. Ehrenzweig makes a similar argument about painting when he says that the shapes perceived subliminally in the background detail lend meaningfulness to the foregrounded figures.  

The play's dream-like inevitability and the love between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth intersect in the figures of the witches who most clearly situate the play on the borders between dream and waking, between the realm of the ethical and that of compulsive. In so far as they are seen by Banquo as well as Macbeth, they are part of Macbeth's waking world, but their supernatural attributes blend them into a dream realm. Since we see before Macbeth does what later fuses to his dreamlike state of mind, the witches become part of the textual metaphor that expresses Macbeth's unconscious desire. The desire which they represent, however, is not primarily for the crown with which they tempt him, nor only, as J.I.M. Stewart argues, for the murderous vision that enraptures him.  

It is precisely for the fusion of violence and femininity represented by the witches. The fear that accompanies Macbeth's desire is expressed in their ugliness, while the force of his unknown desire is expressed in the aura of supernatural force that defines them. The attributes and images that the witches share with Lady Macbeth and their role in instigating the murder that he and his wife will together perform, render them textual expressions of Macbeth's unconscious associations with his wife. As they are of indeterminate sex, bearded women, so Lady Macbeth acts with traditionally masculine initiative and calls upon them, as 'fateful ministers' to unsex her; as we encounter them planning to seduce Macbeth into his crime, so we encounter Lady Macbeth planning to steady his will; as they arise from a barren heath, so Lady Macbeth's barrenness, flowing in the text from her denial of feminine tenderness, renders fruitless Macbeth's crown and
sceptre, and radiates to the country at large, changing it from "our mother" to "our grave." Therefore, it is as though Macbeth in encountering the witches on the heath encounters attributes that he unconsciously associates with his wife. A further link between the witches and Lady Macbeth is suggested by Dennis Biggins who argues that traditionally witches are associated with lust, perverse sexuality and female dominance. This sexual association appears in the text through the sequence of scenes in which the witches' plan to meet Macbeth is followed by the depiction of battle in which Macbeth appears as "Bellona's bridegroom." These images of frighteningly seductive women amidst the violence of battle form the atmosphere from which Lady Macbeth emerges when she appears reading Macbeth's letter. The letter comes out of a textual vacuum, but realistically can only have been written as Macbeth's first act toward fulfilling the dark desires stirred in him by the witches' prophecies. He seems to assume that his wife will continue what the witches began. By so speedily informing her of the events he both defines his project as jointly hers, and expresses his knowledge of her powers to advance it.

The trenchant brevity of his letter to Lady Macbeth suggests the intimacy that is more formally expressed in its close, "This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou mightst not lose the dues of rejoicing by being ignorant of what greatness is promis'd thee" (I. v. 9-12). She instantly intuits Macbeth's excited fear, and assumes, like Macbeth, that they will not rely on circumstances to fulfill the witches' prophecy. As Macbeth immediately envisioned Duncan's murder, rather than himself enthroned, so she will 'catch the nearest way.'The accord of her mind to his suggests that in writing to her he relied on her resolve to steady his. This dramatized mutuality is supported textually by the echo of his words in hers.

He said,

Stars, hide your fires;  
Let not light see my black and deep desires;  
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be  
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

(I, iv, 51-54)

She says,

Come, thick Night,  
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,  
That my keen knife seen not the wound it makes,  
Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,  
To cry'Hold, hold!'

(I, v, 51-54).

When the action in which she functions, as he anticipated, to help him "wrongly win" that which he would not "play false" to attain, arises from this rich texture of dream-like images, it is as though they share their dream as well as their waking lives.

Her response demonstrates that his estimate of her character is as accurate as is hers of his. Their mutual knowledge and, even more, their acknowledgments that they are known to the other, along with their joint enterprise, give their relation an intimacy and power that propels them into their fearsome phantasies. She assumes in his character precisely the vacillation he has already demonstrated, and she adds substance to Macbeth's "horrible imaginings" when she anticipates Duncan's fatal entrance under her battlements. She also draws the images of violence first encountered on the battlefield into familial and sexual realms when she says,
Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctionious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief!

(I. v. 41-51)

Lady Macbeth opposes her normal sexuality to violence in asking, as Jenifoy La Belle argues, to be rid of her femaleness. But a new and perverse sexuality reappears when she wants herself filled "from the crown to the toe with direst cruelty," for that image gives to violence the body's sensuality. Her reference to her woman's breasts merges the image of female sexuality into those of nurturing, but in fear of her own tender nature, as she is of Macbeth's being "too full of the milk o'human kindness," she perverts that image by envisioning 'murth'ring ministers' sucking her milk, now turned to gall. In concluding her anticipation of the murder with the image of the blanketed darkness that is like Macbeth's image, she adds a sexual resonance to her denial of familial and sensuous tenderness.

In the aura of that perverse sexuality she greets Macbeth, feeling 'the future is in the instant,' in the same way Macbeth felt that "nothing is but what is not." That instant contains for Lady Macbeth the generative power that she denied in the previous passage. The "night's great business" will give birth to 'sovereign sway and masterdom,' to power, rather than to a sucking infant. Macbeth enters into his wife's unspoken thought and defines their love within it when he responds, "My dearest love,/Duncan comes here tonight" (I. v. 59-60). The intense and intuitive mutual understanding that informs their terse exchange drains of impact Macbeth's vacillating demure, "We will speak further" (I. v. 72). The rhythm by which each excites the other to the point of action structures the scenes that lead to the murder. The first movement occurred in Macbeth's sending the letter, Lady Macbeth's response, and his collusive reaction to her. The second begins when Macbeth, momentarily free of the rush of desire, enters a Hamlet-like meditation on the 'bank and shoal of time' between life and death. He appreciates the unusual array of ordinary pleasures of life—domestic ease, honour, paternal affection from his king—and fears the consequences that he intuits will follow upon violating the obligations that he can so pleasurably fulfill. Opposed to both fear of reprisal and pleasure in doing that which forestalls it is only the sheer rush of incomprehensible desire. As though intuiting the nature of that desire, Macbeth imagines the retributive forces in the image of the child, a "naked new-born babe / Striding the blast." (I. vii.22-3). That image, taken textually, joins related images of babies and of barrenness to be discussed shortly. Taken as indicative of Macbeth's character, it suggests his intuition that his desire violates not only his obligations as Duncan's kinsman, subject and host, but also strikes at the core of the fertility embedded in love, sexuality, and family. His mind for the moment on ordinary pleasures and free of perverse desire, he is left only with "vaulting ambition" which without the spur of desire, "o'er leaps itself/ And falls to the other side." Previously Macbeth came, as though called, after Lady Macbeth's soliloquy. Now she comes, as though called, to do in fact what both she and Macbeth anticipated she would. By chastising "with the valor of [her] tongue / All that impedes [him] from the golden round" (I. v. 28-9), she functions to bring his enraptured vision, initially so separate from his ordinary reality and daily life into "Time and the hour [that] runs through the roughest day" (I. iii. 152). In writing the letter he took the first step toward integrating his phantasy to his reality. She overcomes the impeding pity, associated by Macbeth with fertility in his image of the "new born babe," by equating it to cowardice and by equating the murder to his sense of manliness.
What beast was't then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it then you were a man;
And, to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. Nor time, nor place,
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Does unmake you. I have given suck, and know
How tender'tis to love the babe that milks me—
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.

(I. vii. 46-58)

In imagistically killing her infant, she exposes the intuition that underlay Macbeth's earlier image of the babe striding the blast. She assumes that their love which will be consummated in the murder represents some alternate reality, intrinsically opposed to fertility, family, and society, all represented in the image of children. In arguing that Macbeth's pledge to her is more binding than the pledge of a mother's love to a child, given the strong analogy generated throughout the play between the kingdom and a family, she makes an encompassing scale of creaturely accord that extends from sucking infants to social harmony, and opposes to it the love between herself and Macbeth. Lady Macbeth defines their love in enmity towards kind and country, tenderness and children. Her images, which resonate in the same ranges that his previously did, far from repelling him, bring him to the point where he can join the desire that was first expressed in the horrifying images of the witches to his own "act and valour" (I. vii. 40).

Narratively the murder is a consequence of the action preceding it, but textually it is a kind of vortex that collects and transforms all of the emotional forces that constitute the play. The text has defined Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's love in their plans to murder Duncan, and it renders their sexual consummation in the murder.

That the murder represents their sexual relationship appears in many ways. It appears in the rhythm by which they excite each other to the "sticking place," as well as in those images that associate the murder with their dark privacy when Macbeth asks that light not see his "black and deep desires." Lady Macbeth deepens the image when she imagines the knife wound made beneath "the blanket of the dark." These images collect into Duncan's unseen, and therefore doubly private, bedroom, and, as Berry argues, Macbeth adds phallic force to the sexual suggestiveness in saying that he will "bend up / Each corporal agent to this horrible feat" (I. vii. 79-80). The hallucinatory dagger that points him towards Duncan indicates a state of mind mid-way between dreaming and waking when it fuses with the one he carries in his hand. In that fused state of consciousness Macbeth makes explicit the previously subtle associations between sexuality and violence when he says,

Now o'er the one half world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep: Witchcraft celebrates
Pale Heccat's off rings; and wither'd Murther,
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost.

(II. i. 49-56)
Having identified himself with "wither'd Murther," celebrated by witchcraft, the "stealthy pace" with which he approaches Duncan's bed suddenly becomes that of Tarquín about to rape Lucrece. It is not only that the murder carries sexual force, as others have argued. The fused image of murder and of rape completes the sexuality between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth that was implied when Macbeth on the battlefield was referred to as "Bellona's bridegroom." After calling Macbeth, as he emerges from the room, "My husband" (I. ii. 14), Lady Macbeth participates in the murder that consummates their love as well as their joint enterprise in entering the bedroom that Macbeth has just left. There she smears with Duncan's blood the swinish grooms, and returns to declare to Macbeth that "My hands are of your color" (II. ii. 61).

The knocking at the Porter's gate that breaks in upon the couple's intense privacy intensifies their intimacy and the Porter's speech adds to the sexual suggestiveness of the previous scene. Having associated himself with the murder by calling himself the porter of hellgate, the Porter enumerates the social forms of equivocating trickery and treachery. This comic version of the witches' "Fair is foul and foul is fair," echoed in myriad ways in the text, foreshadows the social chaos that will radiate from and express the hell of perverse sexuality within the castle. The Porter's jokes on the morally equivocal are associated later to the diabolic witches by Macbeth when he blames his impending defeat on "the equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth" (V. v. 43-4). The Porter links that moral equivocation to sexuality when he says that in provoking desire but inhibiting performance, drink "may be said to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him, and it mars him; it sets him on, and it takes him off; it persuades him, and disheartens him; makes him stand to, and not stand to; in conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and, giving him the lie, leaves him" (II. iii. 30-37). Earlier Lady Macbeth, when Macbeth's will wavered, asked, "Was the hope drunk /Wherein you dress'd yourself?" (I. vii. 35-6). Like the Porter, she associates drunkenness with being unable to "be the same in thine own act and valor / As thou art in desire" (I. vii. 40-1). A few lines later she plans to ply Duncan's chamberlains with "wine and wassail." With little justice (especially since it later appears that she has also drugged their drink) but much imagistic force, she then talks of the "swinish sleep" of the "spongy officers." The image of the swinish and drunken chamberlains acquires sexual overtones when the Porter associates drunkenness with impotence. The cluster of images adds a sexual dimension to Lady Macbeth's contempt of what she sees as Macbeth's unmanly vacillation. The cluster associates the peaceful sleep that Macbeth foregoes with the drunken grooms who "mock[ing] their charge with snores" (II. ii. 6-7) are the object of Lady Macbeth's contempt. Therefore her eagerness to "chastise with the valor of [her] tongue / All that impedes [him] from the golden round" (I. v. 28-9) intimates her scorn for and impatience with swinish impotence. That impotence she so scorns is also associated with Duncan through the image of Duncan in the bedroom surrounded by the sleeping grooms, who later also are gilded with his golden blood. But the character of Duncan, who promised to plant [Macbeth] and labour to make him full of growing, embodies the images of soft nurturing that she despises in Macbeth and represses in herself in order to excite him to manly action. Manliness in both its social and sexual aspects is realized in murder, while quiet sleep, nurture, and hierarchical harmony are associated with sexual and social impotence. The text therefore leaves no middle-ground between impotence and the "restless ecstasy" of erotic violence for ordinary, loving, sexuality. The porter scene, not only extends the theme of equivocation from the witches into the social fabric of the play's world; its portentous grotesquerie reaches into the deepest psychological recesses of the text in the way Freud described jokes revealing what earnestness conceals.

The violence within which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth consummate their sexuality generates both the story of their barren love and the images of children that pervade the text. The witches' barren heath and Macbeth's barren sceptre are born of, or express, the violent love they lead to, while the normal fruition of love, children and parenthood, become textual representatives of the protagonists' own outraged feelings that will constitute their nemesis. In the text the opposition between their barren love and a fertile world appears first in the contrast between the castle, guarded by the croaking raven, in which they consummate their love, and the images of birds in their "pendant bed and procreant cradle" observed by Duncan and Banquo as they approach it. Before the murder Macbeth saw "pity" as an avenging babe; after the murder an image of children represents the equivocating witches when a "bloody child" assures him that he cannot be killed by man "of
woman born," and a crowned child tells him that he will live till Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane. That
tenderness as such has become his enemy appears when the first act that flows from his resolve to let the
"firstlings of his heart . . . be / The firstlings of his hand" (IV. i. 146-7), is to kill Lady Macduff and her
children, though their murder cannot succeed in assuaging the terrible fears that afflict his nights. In doing so
Macbeth generates Macduff's outraged parenthood which coalesces with the images of avenging children and
the more general images of Macbeth's loss of creature comforts—sleep, communal eating, communal
membership. Instead of joining the festive table, Macbeth's sups full of horrors'at the witches'cauldron; instead
of having children, images of them represent inimical fates, and instead of experiencing the tenderness of
parenthood, Macbeth is fated to be killed by one who represents those feelings he and his wife have denied. In
all these ways Macbeth will confront in the plot as a whole, and in what he takes to be a real world, the
extended images of their internal state that earlier characterized his rich imagination, while Lady Macbeth,
whose role it was to affirm the primary reality of the external world, will confront its equivalent in the overtly
nightmare realm she has now entered. They will change places in the course of the action, but the polarities
will remain unchanged.

The erotic violence central to Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's relationship radiates in widening circles to the
most public ranges of their lives. The images that express Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's isolation from
ordinary pleasure echo in the words that describe the country over which they rule. Wanting relief from their
nocturnal agonies, Macbeth determines that they "shall no longer eat in fear and sleep / In the affliction of
these terrible dreams / That shake us nightly" (III. ii. 17-19); and Lennox says that Macduff seeks help in
England so that they may "Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights; / Free from our feasts and banquets
bloody knives" (III. vi. 33-5). The violent images that surrounded the sexualized murder also describe the
body-politic when Lennox adds, "I think our country sinks beneath the yoke; / It weeps, it bleeds, and each
new day a gash / Is added to her wounds" (IV. iii. 39-41). When Ross responds, "Alas, poor country, / Almost
afraid to know itself! It cannot / Be call'd our mother, but our grave" (IV. iii. 164-6), the commonwealth
becomes an image of Lady Macbeth's violation of her maternity. The language spreads from the heart of their
relationship to the periphery, the textual level metaphorically expressing the emotional dynamics of their
violent eroticism.

Once the images of their eroticism have emerged from the blanketed darkness, neither can confront the image
of themselves they see in the other, and the force that bound them begins to separate them. As his inner
turmoil is transformed into images of his country's anguish, Macbeth gradually redefine himself in relation to
Lady Macbeth. The collusive intimacy between them fades almost immediately after Duncan's murder, for
Macbeth begins to espouse her definition of him as an unthinking man of action, and to redefine her in a more
conventionally feminine role, while she becomes more tentative in relation to him. The altered relationship
appears in Macbeth's secrecy about his plan to murder Banquo, and in Lady Macbeth's secrecy about her inner
state. She says, echoing Macbeth's earlier lines,

Nought's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content.
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.

(III. ii. 4-7)

But she denies her anguish by dismissing his when Macbeth envies Duncan who sleeps well "after life's fitful
fever" (III. ii. 24), and he revels in his secret plans to murder Banquo when he tells her to let her
"remembrancer apply to Banquo." Each withdraws from the other as they now make their faces "vizards to
[their] hearts" (III. ii. 30, 35) not, as previously, to secrete themselves from the outside world, but rather to
remain hidden from each other. Macbeth indirectly approaches his plan, saying "O! full of scorpions is my
mind, dear wife! / Thou know'st that Banquo, and his Fleance, lives." When she responds, "But in them
Nature's copy's not eterne" (III. ii. 36-9), he secretly obtains her validation of his unspoken plan. She addresses him as "gentle, my lord," and he her as "love," but in calling her "dearest chuck" (III. ii. 28, 30, 46), and withholding knowledge from her, he denies the equality that was assumed when she asked, "What cannot you and I perform upon the unguarded Duncan?" (I. vii.69-70). Macbeth thus reestablishes the conventional protectiveness of a man towards a woman.17

Having covertly gained her consent, Macbeth proves that he fulfills her standards of manliness by arranging Banquo's death alone. But the eroticized violence, the sexual version of the witches'fair-foulness and foul-fairness, remains in the language with which he anticipates Banquo's death:

Ere the bat hath flown
His cloister'd flight: ere to black Heccat's summons
The shard-borne beetle with his drowsy hums
Hath rung Night's yawning peal, there shall be done
A deed of dreadful note.

(III. ii. 40-4)

"Heccat's summons," "drowsy hums," and "night's yawning peal" suggest the dark ease of seductive sleep that overwhelms and cancels the moral horror that is the overt content. He continues to savour the images in which he couches the contemplated murder when he says, "Light thickens, and the crow / Makes wing to th'rooky wood. /Good things of day begin to droop and drowse, / Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse" (III. ii. 49-52). Enjoying Lady Macbeth's silent "marvel," Macbeth anticipates the murder with a kind of swoon into an auto-erotic violence that excludes her. The process of the lovers'separation, begun after the first murder, is completed after the second. The banquet at which no food is consumed not only represents the dissolution of social accord, but also the accord between Macbeth and his wife. Banquo's ghost, unlike the airborne dagger which Macbeth recognized as unreal, is a full hallucination. It is Macbeth's last revel in the aura of desire before the fearful delights of nightmare retreat, and Macbeth begins to see the world his dream has generated in harsh day light.

Macbeth's horror at Banquo's ghost expresses his attitude toward his own compelling desires. Since he cannot acknowledge the desires that have generated the image, he cannot look upon it. His consciousness approaches what the play of images has already inscribed in the text when he says,

Blood hath been shed ere now, i'th'olden time,
Ere humane statute purg'd the gentle weal;
Ay, and since too, murthers have been perform'd
Too terrible for the ear. The times has been,
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end. But now they rise again,
With twenty mortal murthers on their crowns,
And push us from our stools. This is more strange
Than such a murther is.

(III. iv. 75-83)

Macbeth here approaches a recognition that the horror that fills his world does not arise from the act of regicide, but rather from his imagination of it. With this recognition the gestation begun beneath the blanket of the dark completes itself in a perverse birth. From his imagination, Macbeth is reborn in Lady Macbeth's image of manliness when he says, "Augures and understood relations" have "By maggot-pies, and choughs and rooks brought forth / The secret'st man of blood" (III. iv. 122-5). This new Macbeth will, by enacting the
"strange things [he] has in head before . . . they are scann'd (III. iv. 139-40), create his world in the image of his previous inner life, while Lady Macbeth succumbs to the "thick night" she had invoked and yields to the those "thick-coming" fancies that previously defined him. Banquo's image not only encapsulates Macbeth's past; it also foreshadows his future. Macbeth says of it, "Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold; / Thou hast no speculation in those eyes / Which thou dost glare with" (III. iv. 94-6). Macbeth's sense of life's meaningfulness lay in the confused passion of his relationship to Lady Macbeth; therefore in having excluded her from his consciousness he also denied his own inwardness, and so finds himself "fallen into the seare, the yellow leaf (V. iii. 22). The underlying bond with her remains visible on the plot level when he prepares for his final battle outside the castle, while inside the castle she vainly washes her hands. His fear of meeting death and his concerns for her become a single issue when he simultaneously addresses the Doctor and Seyton. He intertwines directions for the battle with the language appropriate to his despair of curing the "thick-coming fancies" and the memory of a "rooted sorrow" that constitute both her disease and his past:

Come, put mine armor on. Give me my staff.  
Seyton, send out.—Doctor, the thanes fly from me.—  
Come, sir, dispatch.—If thou couldst, doctor, cast  
The water of my land, find her disease,  
And purge it to a sound and pristine health,  
I would applaud thee to the very echo,  
That should applaud again.—Pull't off, say,—  
What rhubarb, cyme, or what purgative drug  
Would scour these English hence?

(V. iii. 48-56)

Apart from Lady Macbeth he is bereft of the rich if horrifying meaningfulness that was contained in their relationship. Having become the man of action she wanted him to be, and repudiated the imagination he shared with her, he can respond to her death with only ashen emptiness:

She should have died hereafter;  
There would have been a time for such a word.  
To-morrow, and to-morrow and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

(V. v. 17-28)

Since Macbeth is preoccupied both with reassuring himself that he is invulnerable to death in battle, he refuses to recognize the mortality that her death implies. As well, he dismisses the reminder of the nightmare realm he bequeathed to her when he says "She should have died hereafter." To avoid the impact of her death in the present, his mind moves first to the future, and then to the past. But having emptied the present of significance, the future stretches ahead, "Tomorrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow," partaking of the present emptiness and "petty pace." He can take no joy in the prospect of escaping death in the coming battle, or of everlasting life, when all recorded time is made up of the insignificant syllables of meaningless action. On the
phrase "creeps in this petty pace" his mind swings from the future to the past, suggesting an association between the image of creeping at a petty pace and the earlier images of children. Like the future, the past also has been drained of meaningfulness, rendering illusory the desire that lit all those "yesterdays" from infancy, or from the play's beginning, to the present. Now they lead only to the "dusty death" he projects onto the future. Therefore he wants life's candle out, the light by which he can read the meaning of Lady Macbeth's death. Not wanting to read it, he sees life itself as a "walking shadow," an image that expresses his sense of himself as a bloodless husk, emptied of desire. The image of the moving shadow suggests one of the stage, but since the candle has been blown out, it is a darkened stage, a scene like Duncan's bedroom that Macbeth both wants and fears to see. Earlier the staged sounds of the clamour at the Porter's gate replaced the images of Duncan's gore, so now Macbeth in his mind's ear hears in the darkness the player who "struts and frets" upon the "bloody stage" his world has become. Rather than seeing an image of Duncan's bloody bedroom coloured by his own desires and revulsion, guilt and rage, he takes a further and final means to distance himself from that vision. He transforms the image of the stage to the less immediate one of a tale, but denies what the tale might reveal by attributing it to an enlarged and grotesque version of a child—an idiot—and so eradicates the meaning of his past, present, and future. But thereby hangs another tale of the process by which Macbeth, in fearing to confront the significance of Lady Macbeth's death, transforms his life into a tale "signifying nothing."18

The textual excitement fades after Lady Macbeth's death, allowing the moral level greater ascendancy as the play nears its close. Macduff, characterized by his grief and outrage for the loss of children, fittingly defeats the intrinsically barren Macbeth and ends a brutal tyranny that has rendered Scotland a barren wasteland. At the end of the play Macbeth and Lady Macbeth die separately. Macbeth's head is on a pole, and Lady Macbeth lies within the castle. The text, however, subtly links them when Malcolm in the play's closing speech evokes them as "this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen" (V.ix.35).

*Macbeth* is not the first of Shakespeare's plays that yokes sexuality to violence. The vision of heterosexuality that is implicit in *Macbeth* and that is expressed in the world that emanates from these lovers, I believe develops from the violence, both passive and active, that more subtly led Othello and Desdemona to consummate their love in death. Their love for each other, in that it creates a world apart from ordinary obligations and reality, is like that between Romeo and Juliet, as well as like that between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, but the idyllic romance of the earlier play was opposed to a violent external world which destroyed it. That same violence seeped into the love of Hamlet and Ophelia, Desdemona and Othello, to render them, in different modes, self-destructive. In the sequence that begins with *Romeo and Juliet*, one sees violence and aggression first as the frame that surrounds two idealized young lovers who are seen brought to their tragic end as a consequence of forces external to them. In *Othello* the violent forces are defined initially as external, with only faint echoes in the language of the characters, but they slowly invade and define the lovers. The process completes itself in *Macbeth* in which the violence explicitly characterizes the lovers, and, as fears and desires shape dreams, extends from them to define their world and to shape the text that contains them.

**Notes**


pp. 409-20.


6 Ralph Berry in Shakespearean Structures (London: Macmillan, 1981) in a precise and careful way argues for a 'subtextual wave' (90) of associations and for what he calls 'chameleon words' (91) that weave sexual puns into other levels of the play. See also a related argument by Harry Berger, Jr., in Text Against Performance in Shakespeare: The Example of Macbeth, The Power of Form in the English Renaissance, ed., Stephen Greenblatt (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1982) pp. 49-81, who says that the textual reading of the play undermines the impact of a stage performance by revealing the way in which the 'good' thanes are involved in the 'scapegoating' of women (74).


8 Ehrenzweig, pp. 32-46.

9 J. I. M. Stewart in Character and Motive in Shakespeare (London: Longmans, Greene, 1949) observes that it was the 'crime and not the crown that compels Macbeth' (93).

10 Dennis Biggins in Sexuality, Witchcraft and Violence in Macbeth, Shakespeare Studies, 8 (1976), pp. 255-77, points out that traditionally witches were presumed to be lustful, sexually perverse and sexually dominant. See also Vesny Wagner, 'Macbeth: Fair is Foul and Foul is Fair,' American Imago, 25 (1968), pp. 242-57.

11 Jenifoy La Belle in "A strange infirmity, Lady Macbeth's Amenorrhea," Shakespeare Quarterly, 31 (1980), 381-86, argues from contemporary medical terminology, that Lady Macbeth invokes infernal powers literally to stop her menstruation, the sign of her sex as well as of her fertility, and later experiences the physiological and emotional consequences of her request having been granted (384). She relates that to the blood images which then substitute for the natural flow. Her argument that literal amenorrhea grounds Lady Macbeth's images, gives additional force to my argument that the murder functions as a sexual act.


13 Berry, p. 92.

14 See Richard Wheeler in Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981), p. 145, Biggins also perceives the sexualized violence of the play in seeing the murder as a kind of rape and Berry says that the Tarqún image joined to the idea of murder creates a phallic murder that is at 'this play's heart of darkness' (92). See also Muriel Bradbrook, Aspects of Dramatic Form in the English and Irish Renaissance: The Collected Papers of Muriel Bradbrook (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1983) and Madelon Gohlke who in 'I wooed thee with my sword'; Shakespeare's Tragic Paradigms, The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare, eds. Carolyn R. Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980): pp. 150-70, relates this play to Othello with the observation that in both murder is a loving act, and love a murdering one (156).


Holland gives a penetrating reading of the core phantasy of this speech as though it were an independent poem (106-14). Where he sees a primal scene phantasy, I see developments from and references to the previous action. The coherence between his reading and mine substantiates my view that imagery and sequence of action in the text substitutes for what would constitute unconscious motivations from the past of a person like Macbeth.

**Macbeth (Vol. 44): Macbeth As Tragic Hero**

Robert B. Heilman (essay date 1966)


[Here, Heilman surveys the dramatic strategies that lead us to identify with a hero who is also a murderer. The critic maintains that Macbeth is a tragedy rather than merely a melodrama or morality play, because our understanding of human nature and of ourselves increases through our experience of empathizing with him.]

I

The difficulties presented by the character of Macbeth—the criminal as tragic hero—have led some critics to charge Shakespeare with inconsistency, others to seek consistency by viewing the initial Macbeth as in some way morally defective, and still others to normalize the hero by viewing the final Macbeth as in some way morally triumphant. Perhaps a recollection of Lascelles Abercrombie's enthusiastic phrase, 'the zest and terrible splendour of his own unquenchable mind' (1925), and of Wilson Knight's comparable 'emerges at last victorious and fearless' (1930), helped stir L. C. Knights to complain (1933) that 'the critics have not only sentimentalized Macbeth—ignoring the completeness with which Shakespeare shows his final identification with evil—but they have slurred the passages in which the positive good is presented by means of religious symbols.' Even after this, so unflighty an editor as Kittredge could say that Macbeth 'is never greater than in the desperate valour that marks his end.' On the other hand, the editor of a *Macbeth* meant for schools describes Macbeth as 'a bold, exacting and presumptuous criminal, . . . bent on destruction for destruction's sake,' 'the champion of evil,' 'a monster,' giving the impression . . . of some huge beast who . . . dies lashing out at everyone within range. But if intemperateness of eulogy or condemnation is exceptional, the opposing impulses are not altogether reconciled; if to many critics Macbeth is damned, there is hardly consensus about either the way down or the mitigating circumstances or how good the bad man is. 'Damned, but 'might be a title for an anthology of critical essays.

The problem of character, which is no more than quickly sketched by this sampling of judgments, becomes intertwined with the problem of generic placement, a standard, though rarely decisive, evaluating procedure.
If the play changes from the study of a complex soul to the history of good men's victory over a criminal and tyrant, has it not dropped from the level of high tragedy to that of political melodrama? This seems harsh, and we can evade it either by discovering unmelodramatic complications in Macbeth as king (a method approached by Neilson and Hill when they acknowledge that Macbeth 'proved a desperately wicked man—but add, with mild confidence,' . . . we are reassured that he was more than the mere butcher the avenging Malcolm not unnaturally calls him'), or by minimizing the importance of character and insisting that the play is a great dramatic poem (as in that anti-Bradleyism which can be traced at least from Knights's 1933 essay). When we look, as many critics do, at the poetic-dramatic structure, we find, among other things, that the nadaism of Macbeth's 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow'speech is not Shakespeare's but Macbeth's and that the play contains numerous images of good kingship and affirmative life; Macbeth is regularly in contrast with the norms of order and hope. The trouble with abstracting a meaning—'Crime doesn't pay' or 'The way of transgressors is hard'—and regarding character as principally a buttress of that meaning is that it has consequences for the placement of drama. Kenneth Muir faces the consequences when he says, 'We may, indeed, call Macbeth the greatest of morality plays . . . .8 However, Muir is understandably diffident about the term'morality play'; so he not only says 'greatest but adds a weighty series of codicils intended to cushion to the utmost, or even counteract, the implicit demotion from 'tragedy'to'morality play'.

The critical uneasiness with the character of Macbeth is different from the usual feelings—uncertainty, attentiveness, curiosity, passion to examine, and so on—stirred by an obscure or elusive character, because it springs from a disturbing sense of discrepancy not evoked, for instance, by Shakespeare's other tragic heroes. We expect the tragic protagonist to be an expanding character, one who grows in awareness and spiritual largeness; yet Macbeth is to all intents a contracting character, who seems to discard large areas of consciousness as he goes, to shrink from multilateral to unilateral being (we try to say it isn't so by deflating the Macbeth of Acts I and II and inflating the Macbeth of Acts IV and V). The diminishing personality is of course not an anomaly in literature, whether in him we follow a gradual decrease of moral possibility or discover an essential parvanimity, but this we expect in satire (Fielding's Blifil, Austen's Wickham, Meredith's Sir Austin Feverel, Eliot's Lydgate), not tragedy. This source of uneasiness with Macbeth, however, is secondary; the primary source is a technical matter, Shakespeare's remarkable choice of point of view—that of this ambitious man who, in Muir's words that sum up the contracting process, 'becomes a villain'. We have to see through his eyes, be in his skin; for us, this is a great breach of custom, and in the effort at accommodation we do considerable scrambling. When we share the point of view of Hamlet, we experience the fear of evil action and of evil inaction; when we share the point of view of Othello and Lear, we experience passionate, irrational action whose evil is not apprehended or foreseen; but when we share the point of view of Macbeth, we have to experience the deliberate choice of evil. Hence a disquiet altogether distinguishable from the irresoluteness of mind before, let us say, some apparent contradictions in Othello.

The problem is like that which usually comes up when readers must adopt the point of view of a character in whom there are ambiguities. Unless structure is based on contrasts, point of view ordinarily confers authority but discomforts, which invariably lead to disagreements, arise when authority apparently extends to matters which, on aesthetic, rational, psychological, or moral grounds, the reader finds it difficult to countenance. 'Disagreements', of course, implies studious recollection in tranquility, or rather, untranquillity; what we are concerned with in this discussion is the immediate, unanalysed imaginative experience which precedes the effort to clarify or define. We are assuming that the person experiencing Macbeth is naturally carried into an identification with Macbeth which, if incomplete, is still more far-reaching than that with anyone else in the play.11 This should be a safe working assumption, whatever the modifications of sensibility that qualify the immediate unanalysed experience and hence lead to alternative explanations of Macbeth in retrospect. Surely Muir is right in saying of our response to Macbeth that 'we are tempted and suffer with him'.12

Behind our condemnation of trivial literature, whether we call it 'sentimental', 'meretricious', or something else, lies the sense that the characters whom for the moment we become give us an inadequate or false sense of
reality, call into action too few of our human potentialities. Hence 'tragedy' tends not simply to designate a
genre, in which there may be widely separated levels of excellence, but to become an honorific term: it names
a noble enterprise, the action of a literary structure which compels us to get at human truth by knowing more
fully what we are capable of—'knowing', not by formal acts of cognition but by passing imaginatively through
revelatory experiences. In a morality we see a demonstration of what happens; in tragedy we act out what
happens, undergoing a kind of kinaesthetic initiation into conduct we would not ordinarily acknowledge as
belonging to us. The problem is how far this process of illuminating induction can go without running into
resistance that impedes or derail the tragic experience, without exciting self-protective counter-measures
such as retreating from tragic co-existence, with the hero to censorious observation of him from a distant
knoll. Macbeth at least permits this way out by its increasingly extensive portrayal, in Acts IV and V, of the
counterforces whom we see only as high-principled seekers of justice. Do we, so to speak, defect to them
because Macbeth, unlike Lear and Othello, moves into a greater darkness in which we can no longer discern
our own lineaments? Do we, then, turn tragedy into melodrama or morality?

II

That, of course, is a later question. The prior question is the mode of our relationship with Macbeth when he
kills Duncan; here we have to consent to participation in a planned murder, or at least tacitly accept our
capability of committing it. The act of moral imagination is far greater, as we have seen, than that called for
by the germinal misdeeds of Lear or the murder by Othello, since these come out of emotional frenzies where
our tolerance, or even forgiveness, is so spontaneous that we need not disguise our kinship with those who
realize in action what we act in fantasy. Yet technically Shakespeare so manages the situation that we become
Macbeth, or at least assent to complicity with him, instead of shifting to that simple hostility evoked by the
melodramatic treatment of crime. We accept ourselves as murderers, so to speak, because we also feel the
strength of our resistance to murder. The initial Macbeth has a fullness of human range that makes him hard to
deny; though a kind of laziness makes us naturally vulnerable to the solicitation of some narrow-gauge
characters, we learn by experience and discipline to reject these (heroes of cape and sword, easy masters of
the world, pure devils, simple victims); and correspondingly we are the more drawn in by those with a large
store of human possibilities, good and evil. Macbeth can act as courageous patriot (I, ii, 35 ff.), discover that
he has dreamed of the throne ('... why do you start ... ?'—I, iii, 51), entertain the 'horrid image' of murdering
Duncan (I, iii, 135), be publicly rewarded by the king (I, iv), be an affectionate husband (I, v), survey, with
anguished clarity, the motives and consequences of the imagined deed; reject it; feel the strength of his wife's
persuasion, return to this terrible feat(I, vii, 80); undergo real horrors of anticipation (II, i, 31 ff.) and of
realization that he has actually killed Duncan (II, ii, 14 ff). Here is not a petty scoundrel but an extraordinary
man, so capacious in feeling and motive as to have a compelling representativeness; we cannot adopt him
selectively, feel a oneness with some parts of him and reject others; we become the murderer as well as the
man who can hardly tolerate, in prospect or retrospect, the idea of murder. The suffering is so great that the
act is hedged about with penance; unless we are neurotic, we cannot pay such a price without earning it;
murder belongs, as it were, to normalcy—to us in our normalcy. Furthermore, the anguish is so powerful and
protracted, and the terrible feat so quickly done, that it marks only a brief failure of moral governance; we
seem to sacrifice only a mite of the sentience that we instinctively attribute to ourselves. That, too, after
solicitations whose power we feel directly: 'Vaulting Ambition', indeed, but also challenges to our manly
courage, the promise of security, and, behind these, the driving strength of another soul not easy to disappoint
or even, when the other speaks for a part of ourselves, to resist. These persuasions, in turn, are a supplement
to supernatural soliciting (I, iii, 130), to fate and metaphysical aid (I, v, 26). Finally, Shakespeare affords the
reader one more aid in accepting his alliance with the murderer: that alteration of ordinary consciousness that
enhances the persuasiveness of deviant conduct by the 'good man'. From the first prophetic phrases Macbeth
has been 'rapt', a word applied to him thrice (I, iii, 57, 142; I, v, 5), and when the knocking is heard Lady
Macbeth adjures him,
Be not lost
So poorly in your thoughts;

(II, ii, 71-2)

there are also his dagger-vision speech before the murder (II, i, 33 ff), and after it the hallucinatory
impressions that make Lady Macbeth use the word'brainsickly'(II, ii, 46). The note of unsound mind helps
make the murderer'One of us', to use Conrad's term, rather than a criminal-outsider.

If it be a function of tragedy, as we have suggested, to amplify man's knowledge of himself by making him
discover, through imaginative action, the moral capabilities to which he may ordinarily be blind, then
Shakespeare, in the first two acts of Macbeth, has so managed his tools that the function is carried out
superlatively well. He leads the reader on to accept himself in a role that he would hardly dream of as his. If it
be too blunt to say that he becomes a murderer, at least he feels murderousness to be as powerful as a host of
motives more familiar to consciousness. Whether he knows it or not, he knows something more about himself.
It may be that knows'takes us too far into the realm of the impalpable, but to use it is at least to say
metaphorically that the reader remains'with'Macbeth instead of drifting away into non-participation and
censure. Shakespeare's dramaturgic feat should not be unappreciated.

III

That behind him, Shakespeare moves ahead and takes on a still greater difficulty: the maintaining of identity,
his and ours, with a character who, after a savage initial act, goes on into other monstrosities, gradually loses
more of his human range, contracts, goes down hill. Surely this is the most demanding technical task among
the tragedies. Othello and Lear both grow in knowledge; however reluctantly and incompletely, they come
into a sense of what they have done, and advance in powers of self-placement. With them we have a sense of
recovery, which paradoxically accompanies the making of even destructive discoveries. Renouncing blindness
is growth. Macbeth does not attract us into kinship in this way; his own powers of self-recognition seem to
have been squandered on the night of the first murder and indirectly in the dread before Banquo's ghost.
Nevertheless there are passages in which he has been felt to be placing and judging himself. There may indeed
be something of tragic self-knowledge in the man who says that he has'the gracious Duncan . . . murder'd'and

mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man;

(III, i, 65, 67-8)

yet he is not saying' I have acted evilly', much less' I repent of my evil conduct', but rather,' I have paid a high
price—and for what? To make Banquo the father of kings.'Macbeth is not so simple and crude as not to know
that the price is high, but his point is that for a high price he ought to be guaranteed the best goods; and in
prompt search of the best goods he elaborates the remorselessly calculating rhetoric by which he inspirits the
murderers to ambush Banquo and Fleance. Again, he can acknowledge his and Lady Macbeth's nightmares
and declare buried Duncan better off than they, but have no thought at all of the available means of mitigating
this wretchedness; the much stronger motives appear in his preceding statement'We have scorched the snake,
not kill'd it'and his following one, 'O, full of scorpions is my mind . . . that Banquo, and his Fleance, lives'(III,
ii, 13, 36-7). The serpents of enmity and envy clearly have much more bite than the worm of conscience.

I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far

(III, iv, 136-7)
encourages some students to speak as if Macbeth were actuated by a sense of guilt, but since no expectable response to felt guilt inhibits his arranging, very shortly, the Macduff murders, it seems more prudent to see in these words only a technical summary of his political method. In the sere, the yellow leaf lines Macbeth's index of the deprivations likely to afflict him in later years (V, iii, 23 ff.) suggests to some readers an acute moral awareness; it seems rather a regretful notice of social behaviour, such as would little trouble the consciousness of a man profoundly concerned about the quality of his deeds and the state of his soul. Finally, in Macbeth's battlefield words to Macduff—

my soul is too much charg'd
With blood of thine already—

(V, viii, 5-6)

some critics have detected remorse. It may be so, but in the general context of actions of a man increasingly apt in the sanguinary and freed from refinement of scruple, there is much to be said for the suggestion that he is 'rationalizing his fear'; possibly, too, he is unconsciously placating the man who has most to avenge and of whom the First Apparition has specifically warned him (IV, i, 71).

Since different Shakespearians have been able to find in such passages a continuance of genuine moral sensitivity in Macbeth, it is possible that for the nonprofessional reader they do indeed belong to the means by which a oneness with Macbeth is maintained. If so, then we have that irony by which neutral details in an ugly man's portrait have enough ambiguity to help win a difficult assent to him. However, a true change of heart is incompatible with a retention of the profits secured by even the temporarily hardened heart, and the fact is that once Macbeth has become king, all of his efforts are directed to hanging on to the spoils of a peculiarly obnoxious murder. Shakespeare has chosen to deal not only with an impenitent, though in many ways regretful, man, but with one whose crime has been committed only to secure substantial worldly advantages (in contrast with the wrongs done by Lear and Othello). Perhaps what the play says is that such a crime has inevitable consequences, that worldly profit—goods, honour, power—is so corrupting that, once committed to it, the hero can never really abjure it, can never really repent and seeks ways of spiritual alteration, though he may cry out against the thorns and ugliness of the road he cannot leave. However far such a theory can be carried, it is plain that Macbeth, once he has taken the excruciatingly difficult first step on the new route, discovers in himself the talents for an unsurrenderable athleticism in evil.

The artist's problem is that for a reader to accompany such a character and to share in his intensifying depravity might become intolerable; the reader might simply flee to the salvation of condemning the character. This does not happen. For, having chosen a very difficult man to establish our position—to give us shoes and skin and eyes and feeling—Shakespeare so manages the perspective that we do not escape into another position. As with all his tragic heroes, Shakespeare explores the point of view of self, the self-defending and self-justifying motions of mind and heart; alert as we are to self-protectiveness in others, we still do not overtly repudiate that of Macbeth. That is, Macbeth finds ways of thinking about himself and his dilemmas that we find congenial, and, even more than that, ways of feeling which we easily share. The dramatist can rely somewhat, of course, on that ambiguous sympathy with the criminal that human beings express in various ways; even an artist who is not romanticizing a criminal can count on it up to a point if he protects it against counter feelings. Suppose, for instance, that we had seen a great deal of Duncan at Macbeth's castle or that the murder were done on the stage or that Macbeth did not undergo the agonies depicted in II, ii: he would already have lost his role as erring humanity, and we ours as secret sharer. Suppose, also, that he then took the throne by blunt force, or were grossly shameless, or rapped out lies which everyone knew to be lies. But he does not drive us away by such methods; instead, our murderer is a man who suffers too much, as it were, really to be a murderer; he agonizes more than he antagonizes. After the murder, we next see him in a painfully taxing and challenging position—the utter necessity of so acting in public, at a moment of frightful public calamity, that neither his guilt will be revealed nor his ambition threatened. The
pressure on him shifts to us, who ought to want him caught right there. Can he bring it off? Can we bring it off? In some way we become the terribly threatened individual, the outnumbered solitary antagonist; further, our own secret self is at stake, all our evil, long so precariously covered over, in danger of being exposed, and we of ruin. But we miraculously come through, our terrible anxiety somehow transmuted to strength under fire; we say the right things ('Had I but died an hour before this chance', II, iii, 89), have the presence of mind to be carried away by fury and kill the chamberlains and turn suspicion on them, and still to repent the fury (105). Relief, perhaps triumph. This statement may require more delicacy and precision, but it should indicate the way in which Shakespeare instinctively approaches the task of enticing us into collusion. We remain the murderer in part because the pressure of other motives makes us forget that we are. What we forget we do not deny.

Macbeth is in danger of degenerating from Everyman into monster, that is, of pushing us from unspoken collusion to spoken judgment, when he coolly plots against Banquo. But Shakespeare moves Macbeth quickly into a recital of motives and distresses that invite an assent of feeling. Macbeth's important 25-line soliloquy (III, i, 47-71) is in no sense a formal apologia, but it has the effect of case-making by the revelation of emotional urgencies whose force easily comes home to us. There are three of these urgencies. The first is fear, that especial kind of fear that derives from insecurity: ' . . . to be safely thus'(48) is a cry so close to human needs that it can make us forget that the threat to safety is made by justice. The fear is of Banquo, a man of dauntless temper', of wisdom'(51, 52); we can credit ourselves with Macbeth's ability and willingness to discriminate at the same time that, unless we make an improbable identification with Banquo, we can enter into the lesser man's sense of injury and his inclination to purge himself of secondclass moral citizenship. The second great appeal is that to the horror of being in a cul de sac, of feeling no continuity into something beyond the present: all that we have earned will be nothing if we have but a'fruitless crown','a barren sceptre','No son'(60-3). It is the Sisters that did this;'they'are treating us unfairly, inflicting a causeless deprivation. Our Everyman's share of paranoia is at work. Yet the price has been a high one ('vessel of my peace', loss of'mine eternal jewel'); it is as if a bargain had been unfulfilled, and we find ourselves sharing the third emotional pressure—resentment at a chicanery of events which need not be borne.

The anxiety in the face of constant threats, the pain at being cut off from the future, the bitterness of the wretched bargain—these emotions, since they may belong to the most upright life, tend to inhibit our making a conscious estimate of the uprightness of the man who experiences them. This may be a sufficient hedge against our splitting away from Macbeth when he is whipping up the Murderers against Banquo. But since Macbeth can trick us into the desire to get away with it', or into discovering that we can have this desire, it may be that even the subornation of murder evokes a distant, unidentified, and unacknowledgeable compliance. Here the appeal would be that of executive dispatch and rhetorical skill in a difficult cause; it is satisfying to use against another the method before which one has been defenceless earlier, the appeal to manliness (91 ff.), to hint the grave danger to oneself (115-17), to claim a meritorious abstention from'barefaced power'(118), though the power is legitimate. Then quickly, before we have time to cast off the spell, to catch ourselves tricked into a silent partnership in crime and to start backing away from it, we are enthralled in another way: again, this time with both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, the terrible fear, the sense of constant menace, the'affliction of these terrible dreams', the'torture of the mind'(III, ii, 18, 21). Afflictions and tortures: we have our own, and we do not stop, step to one side, and think that ours are more just and noble than those of the wretched royal pair. Macbeth's language, in a brilliant touch, even makes the usurpers weak victims, such as we sometimes like to be: threatening them is a'snake', cut in two, but reuniting to extend the'danger', against which we offer but'poor malice', that is, feeble opposition (14-15). Here is one of the subtler of the series of verbal and dramatic means by which we are held with'Macbeth and the queen; we are with them as long as we do not turn and say,'But what do you expect?'And as long as we do not say that, we have not shifted to the posture invited by melodrama and morality play.

At the banquet scene the courtesy and breeding of the host and hostess hardly seem that of vulgar criminals, from whom we would quickly spring away into our better selves. But before the Ghost appears, Macbeth
learns of the escape of Fleance, and he speaks words that appeal secretly to two modes of responsiveness. He introduces the snake image from III, ii, 14: as for Banquo,'There the grown serpent lies', but then there's Fleance:

the worm that's fled
Hath nature that in time will venom breed.

(III, iv, 29-30)

It is not that we rationally accept Macbeth's definition of father and son, but that we share his desperateness as destined victim; and his image for the victimizing forces, as long as it is not opposed openly in the context, is one to evoke the fellowship of an immemorial human fear. This, however, tops off a subtler evocation of sympathy, Macbeth's

I am cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd, bound in
To saucy doubts and fears.

(24-5)

The new image for fear, which we have already been compelled to feel, is peculiarly apt and constraining: it brings into play the claustrophobic distress that can even become panic. We do not pause for analysis, stand off, and say,'It is the claustrophia of crime'; rather the known phobia maintains our link with the criminal. Then, of course, the moral responsiveness implied by the appearance of the Ghost and by Macbeth's terror make a more obvious appeal, for here the traditional'good man'is evident. Not only does he again become something of a victim, but the royal pair draw us into their efforts to save a situation as dangerous as it is embarrassing and humiliating. They are in such straits that we cannot now accuse them, much less triumph over them. Macbeth's demoralizing fear, finally, works in a paradoxical way: fear humanizes the warrior and thus brings us closer to him, while his inevitable reaction from it into almost hyperbolic courage, with its conscious virility ('Russian bear','Hyrcan tiger', etc., 99 ff), strikes a different chord of consent. From now on until the end, indeed, Macbeth is committed to a bravery, not unspontaneous but at once compensating and desperate—a bravura of bravery—that it is natural for us to be allied with.

The danger point is that at which the admired bravery and its admired accompaniment, resolution (such as appears in the visit to the Witches, IV, i), are distorted into the ruthlessness of the Macduff murders. Here we are most likely to be divorced from Macbeth, to cease being actors of a role and become critics of it. At any rate, Shakespeare takes clear steps to'protect'Macbeth's position. That'make assurance double sure'(IV, i, 83) has become a cliché is confirmatory evidence that the motive is well-nigh universal; getting rid of Macduff becomes almost an impersonal safety measure, additionally understandable because of the natural wish 'to sleep in spite of thunder' (86). We come close to pitying his failure to grasp the ambiguity of the oracles, for we can sense our own naiveté and wishful thinking at work; and his disillusionment and emptiness on learning that Banquo's line will inherit the throne, are not so alien to us that Macbeth's retaliatory passion is unthinkable. Shakespeare goes ahead with the risk: we see one of the cruel murders, and the next time Macbeth appears, he is hardly attractive either in his almost obsessive denying of fear (v, iii, 1-10) or in his letting his tension explode in pointless abuse of his servant, partly for fearfulness (11-18). Still, the impulses are ones we can feel. Now, after Macbeth has been on the verge of breaking out into the savage whom we could only repudiate, things take a different turn, and Macbeth comes back toward us as more than a loathsome criminal. He is'sick at heart'(19)—words that both speak to a kindred feeling and deny that the speaker is a brute. He meditates on approaching age (22 ff ), with universality of theme and dignity of style teasing us into a fellowship perhaps strengthened by respect for the intellectual candour with which he lists the blessings he has forfeited. Above all he has a desperately sick wife: pressed from without, still he must confer with the doctor and in grief seek remedies for a'mind diseas'd','a rooted sorrow','that perilous stuff/
Which weighs upon the heart'(40-5). Shakespeare makes him even extend this humane concern, either literally or with a wry irony that is still not unattractive, to the health of Scotland:

find her disease,  
And purge it to a sound and pristine health.

(51-2)

Along with all of the troubles that he meets, more often than not with sad equanimity, he must also face crucial desertions:'the thanes fly from me'(49). Like us all, he tells his troubles to the doctor. He has become an underdog, quite another figure from the cornered thug, supported by a gang of sinister loyalty, that he might be. This athlete in evil, as we called him earlier, has had to learn endurance and endure, if we may be forgiven, the loneliness of the long-distance runner. Against such solitude we hardly turn with reproof.

Macbeth opened the scene crying down fear; he goes on with three more denials of fear, one at the end (32, 36, 59); now we are able to see in the repetition an effort to talk down deep misgivings, and the hero again approximates Everyman, ourselves. When Macbeth next appears, just before the battle, it is the same: he opens and closes the scene literally or implicitly denying fear, even though the prophecy of his end seems miraculously fulfilled (v, v, 1-15, 51-2). Meanwhile the queen's death is reported, and the warrior, moved but finely controlled, turns grief into contemplation, with the seductiveness of common thought in uncommon language. The closing battle scene is a series of denials of fear, appealing to both pity and admiration. Some details are instinctively ingratiating.'They have tied me to a stake; I cannot fly'(v, vii, 1)—oneself as the victim of others bent on cruel sport.'Why should I play the Roman fool . . . ?'(v, viii, 1)—no moral retreat, no opting out of adversity.' I will not yield'(27)—the athlete's last span of endurance, fight against all odds.

IV

My intention has been, not to offer a full study of Macbeth or a fresh account of his moral alteration, not to argue that he is a worse man than some have thought (though some analyses seem not to catch what Knights called' the completeness [of] his final identification with evil') or a better man than other men have thought (though he is remarkably endowed with aspects of personality not ordinarily expected in a man committed to evil), but to describe the apparent impact made upon the imagination by certain deeds, thoughts, and feelings of his. Since there is hardly a need to demonstrate that Macbeth is a villain and that villains ordinarily repel us, the emphasis has naturally fallen upon those elements in him that tend to elicit, in whatever degree, fellow-feeling, pity, favour, or even admiration. Macbeth possibly establishes a subtle kinship by setting in motion certain impulses which we would rather not admit—anomalous siding with the criminal, aggressive ambition, envy, the pleasure of getting away with it (which includes leaving the't'unexamined). More frequently the appeal to allegiance is that of states of situations which are neutral in that they may come to good or bad men but which, without analysing the merits of the figure involved, we find it difficult not to fear or pity—the threat of exposure, the anxieties of a perilous position, relentless enclosure by men and circumstances, nightmares and insomnia of whatever origin, the pressing need for greater safety, the pain of miscalculation and the gnawing sense of a bad bargain, any enlargement of the penalties of advanced age, desertion, the unequal struggle, the role of the underdog. Finally, and more important, Macbeth early gives every sign of having a conscience, and later he exhibits qualities and abilities that normally elicit respect or admiration—resourcefulness under severely taxing stresses, readiness for intolerable difficulties, resolution, the philosophic cast of mind, endurance, bravery.

If the general demonstration, as it is summarized here, has merit, it opens the way to several other points. For one thing, it should help explain some rather enthusiastic accounts of Macbeth: that which binds us to him, either the painfulness of what he endures or the qualities that he shares with men we admire, so overwhelms the sense of the ruthless tyrant that we either let this slip out of operative consciousness or take it for granted.
as not requiring further discussion, and proceed then to erect a rational form for all the feelings of kinship or approval. Shakespeare has so thoroughly attacked the problem of keeping a villain from being a mere villain that at times it has apparently been easy to lose sight of his villainy. On the other hand, the endowing of Macbeth with the power to attract fellow-feeling and even approval makes it unlikely that the sympathies of the audience are switched to his enemies.\(^{17}\) This is a crucial matter. For if such a switch does take place, then the play does not hold us in an essentially tragic engagement, but carries us into a relationship like that with Richard III (a play often used to illustrate Macbeth).

To be convinced of Macbeth's retention of our sympathy may seem to imply a denial of our sympathy to Malcolm, Macduff, and the conquering party. By no means: obviously we share their passions whenever these control the action, and we may even cheer them on. Yet we do not remain fixedly and only with them, as we do with Richmond and his party in Richard III, and with such forces in all dramas with a clearly melodramatic structure. When the anti-Macbeth leaders occupy the stage, we are unable not to be at one with them; but the significant thing is that when his point of view is resumed, Macbeth again draws us back, by the rather rich means that we have examined, into our old collusion. After III, vi, when we first see committed opposition to Macbeth (‘... this our suffering country, / Under a hand accurs'd!’—48-9), the two sides alternate on the stage until they come together in battle. In one scene we have the rather easy, and certainly reassuring, identification with the restorers of order; in the next, the strange, disturbing emotional return to the camp of the outnumbered tyrant. We move back and forth between two worlds and are members of both. As a contemporary novelist says of a character who is watching fox and hounds, 'She wanted it to get away, yet when she saw the hounds she also wanted them to catch it.'\(^{18}\)

Macbeth, in other words, has a complexity of form which goes beyond that normally available to melodrama and morality play, where the issue prevents ambiguity of feeling and makes us clear-headed partisans. Whether Macbeth goes on beyond this surmounting of melodramatic limitations to high achievement as tragedy is the final problem. It turns, I believe, on Shakespeare's treatment of Macbeth, that is, on whether this retains the complexity that cannot quite be replaced by the kind of complexities that Macbeth does embrace. Here, of course, we are in the area of our mode of response to character, where all is elusive and insecure, and we can only be speculative. What I have proposed, in general, is that, because of the manifold claims that Macbeth makes upon our sympathy, we are drawn into identification with him in his whole being; one might say that he tricks us into accepting more than we expect or realize. If it is true that we are led to experience empathy with a murderer and thus to come into a more complete 'feeling knowledge' of what human beings are like (tragic experience as the catharsis of self-ignorance), then Shakespeare has had a success which is not trivial. Yet there remains a legitimate question or two. Let us try this approach. It is not the business of tragedy to let man know that he is only a scoundrel or devil (any more than its business is to let him know that he is really an angel); it is obvious enough that such an experience would be too circumscribed to gain assent to its truthfulness. In so far as he pushes us in that direction, Shakespeare makes the indispensable qualifications. Yet the felt qualifications can be expressed in ways that are less than satisfactory; for instance, 'Macbeth is a villain, but there's also this to be said', or, still more, 'Macbeth is a wonderful man. Oh yes, a villain, of course.' Such flip statements are not found literally in Macbeth criticism, but they do represent the tendency to make a unitary assessment and then add an afterthought, that is, to pull the constituent elements apart unevenly instead of holding them together in a fusion not so simply describable.

It is possible that Shakespeare's basic method encourages this tendency. Shakespeare first chooses a protagonist who in action is worse than the other main tragic heroes, and then tends to make him better than other tragic heroes, in effect to make him now one, and now the other. Shakespeare had to protect Macbeth against the unmixed hostility that the mere villain would evoke; perhaps he over-protected him, letting him do all his villainies indeed, but providing him with an excess of devices for exciting the pity, warmth, and approval which prompt forgetfulness of the villainies. If critics have, as Knights protested, sentimentalized Macbeth, it may be that the text gives them more ground than has been supposed, that Shakespeare's own sympathy with Macbeth went beyond that which every artist owes to the evil man whom he wants to realize.
We may be driven to concluding that Shakespeare has kept us at one with Macbeth, in whom the good man is all but annihilated by the tragic flaw, by making him the flawed man who is all but annihilated by the tragic goodness—that is, the singular appeal of the man trapped, disappointed, deserted, deprived of a wife, finished, but unwhimpering, contemplative, unyielding. If that is so, Shakespeare has kept us at one with a murderer by making him less than, or other than, a murderer.

This may seem a perverse conclusion after we have been pointing to the risks Shakespeare took by showing Macbeth lengthily arranging the murder of Banquo and by having the murder of Lady Macduff and her children done partly on stage. The risk there, however, was of our separation from Macbeth as in melodrama; the risk here is of an empathic union on too easy grounds. For what is finally and extraordinarily spared Macbeth is the ultimate rigour of self-confrontation, the act of knowing directly what he has been and done. We see the world judging Macbeth, but not Macbeth judging himself. That consciousness of the nature of the deed which he has at the murder of Duncan gives way to other disturbances, and whatever sense of guilt, if any, may be inferred from his later distresses (we surveyed, early in section iii, the passages sometimes supposed to reveal a confessional or penitent strain), is far from an open facing and defining of the evil done—the murders, of course, the attendant lying, and, as is less often noted, the repeated bearing of false witness (II, iii, 99; III, i, 29 ff; III, iv, 49). Of Cawdor, whose structural relationship to Macbeth is often mentioned, we are told that

very frankly he confess'd his treasons,
Implor'd your Highness' pardon, and set forth
A deep repentance.

(I, iv, 5-7)

Macduff, with rather less on his conscience than Macbeth, could say,

sinful Macduff,
They were all struck for thee—nought that I am;
Not for their own demerits, but for mine,
Fell slaughter on their souls.

(IV, iii, 224-7)

Cawdor and Macduff set the example which Macbeth never follows; or, to go outside the play, Othello and Lear set examples that Macbeth never follows. Part of Hamlet's agonizing is centred in his passion to avoid having to set such an example. Macbeth simply does not face the moral record. Instead he is the saddened and later bereaved husband, the man deprived of friends and future, the thinker, the pathetic believer in immunity, the fighter. These roles are a way of pushing the past aside—the past which cries out for a new sense, in him, of what it has been. If, then, our hypothesis about the nature of tragic participation is valid, the reader ends his life with and in Macbeth in a way that demands too little of him. He experiences forlornness and desolation, and even a kind of substitute triumph—anything but the soul's reckoning which is a severer trial than the world's judgment. He is not initiated into a true spaciousness of character, but follows, in Macbeth, the movement of what I have called a contracting personality. This is not the best that tragedy can offer.19

Notes

1 See, for instance, Wolfgang J. Weilgart,'Macbeth: Demon and Bourgeois', Shakespeare Society of New Orleans Publications (1946), and its citations, as well as the citations in Kenneth Muir's Introduction to the Arden Macbeth (1951 ff.), pp. xlviii ff. Weilgart's ill-written essay, based on Karl Jaspers's Psychologie der Weltanschauungen is not uninstructive.
For fuller quotations and appropriate comments, see Muir, *op. cit.* pp. lix ff. The Abercrombie quotation is from *The Idea of Great Poetry*, the Knight from *The Wheel of Fire* (Knight carried the idea further in *Christ and Nietzsche*, 1948).

*How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?*, pp. 54-5.


George Clifford Rosser, Critical Commentary, *Macbeth* (1957), pp. 38, 39, 40, 44. This work might be compared with a Catholic schoolboy manual, the Rev. R. F. Walker's *Companion to the Study of Shakespeare: Macbeth* (1947). The often useful application of Catholic doctrine unfortunately keeps giving way to sermons.


Cf. Gogol's *Inspector General*, where the meaning 'The way of transgressors is hard' is conveyed exclusively through characters acting in character.


For convenience I shall use the word 'readers' to denote literal readers, spectators at the theatre, viewers, all those who see the play on stage or in print or in any other medium. I use 'we' to denote the hypothetical possessor of characteristic responsiveness.

Some critics always defend apparent authority; others redefine the character who has it; still others look for artistic signs that the apparent holder of authority has been subtly disavowed. Thus, one school accepts Gulliver's view of himself and of the Houyhnhnms; another argues that the total structure of Book IV turns the satire against Gulliver. The readers who accept Moll Flanders's view of things resort to various shifts to deal with her inconsistencies; the opposite way out is to treat Moll as a product of confusions in Defoe's own mind.

Even when an over-valuing of Brecht's theories puts something of a halo upon the *Verfremdungseffekt* and of a shadow upon *Einfühlung*. The inevitability of *Einfühlung*, whatever its precise character, is indicated by Brecht's having to rewrite to try to prevent it after it had appeared in responses to his own work. Perhaps, however, we need a new term like 'consentience' to suggest more than 'sympathy' but less than 'identification' or 'empathy', which suffer from popular overuse.

*Shakespeare: The Great Tragedies*, Writers and Their Work No. 133 (1961), p. 35. Cf. his statement that 'the Poet for the Defence . . . can make us feel that we might have fallen in the same way' (Introduction, Arden edition, p. 1, and similarly on p. Ivi).

Gorki's *Lower Depths*, Ibsen's *Wild Duck*, and o'Neill's *Iceman Cometh* are remarkably alike in their portrayal of the need of self-protective illusions; in effect they deny the possibility of the tragic experience of illumination. But recent playwrights like Osborne, Pinter, and Albee choose an opposite course: they make the reader identify with one evil or another by giving him nowhere else to go. They permit no illusions of saving virtue (though they may foster illusions of irremediable defectiveness). This is of course the way of satire, which aspires to much less than the tragic range of personality.

This difficulty will of course not exist for critics who believe that Macbeth, though a lost soul, has wrenched some sort of moral triumph from his career.

Among the accounts of Macbeth's descent one of the most interesting is that of W. C. Curry, *Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1937).

Muir, *Shakespeare: The Great Tragedies*, p. 36. However, Muir uses the words rather incidentally to name one of the factors that may account for the difficulty of presenting the play successfully on the stage. He may not be strongly convinced that sympathies do switch. At any rate, his words conveniently summarize a point of view probably held widely.


As Muir says,' . . . the last two acts are not quite on the level of the first three'(*Shakespeare: The Great Tragedies*, p. 36). This is a passing comment, however, again in the context of the actability of the play. Cf. G. B. Harrison,' . . . *Macbeth* is in some ways the least satisfactory of Shakespeare's mature tragedies. The last Act falls away . . .' This is from the Introduction to the Penguin *Macbeth* (1937), p. 17. But Harrison uses this statement to introduce the subject of revisions in the text.

Besides the comparisons that have been made, there is another that has elucidatory value. Garrick added to Macbeth's lines a closing speech which in content might have been inspired by the same sense of shortcoming that prevails in the present essay, but which is in the common rhetorical vein of eighteenth-century improvements of Shakespeare:

*Tis done! the scene of life will quickly close. Ambition's vain delusive dreams are fled, And now I wake to darkness, guilt, and horror; I cannot bear it! let me shake it off—It will not be; my soul is clog'd with blood—I cannot rise! I dare not ask for mercy—It is too late, hell drags me down; I sink, I sink,—my soul is lost for ever!—Oh!—Oh!

(Quoted in Arden edition, p. xlvi, n. 2.) One wonders whether Garrick was remembering Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, which *Macbeth* resembles, notably in the great ambition of the hero, in the enormous struggle at the time of the first decisive step, and in the phenomena of psychic strain. Garrick's last four lines might be a précis of Faustus's final hundred lines. But this striking fact underscores the difference in the treatment of the two heroes: Faustus sees the whole truth of his career with utmost clarity, but because of a 'block', as we would say, cannot take advantage of the grace he rightly feels is offered; Macbeth, on the other hand, lacks this clarity and hence is hardly able to advance to the next stage, where the issue is spiritual despair.

**Michael Davis (essay date 1979)**


**In the following essay, originally published in 1979, Davis reads Macbeth as a play that demonstrates the implications of understanding life solely in terms of valor and manliness. From this perspective, the critic argues, a man must be master of his fate, and thus when Macbeth trusts in the witches' prophecies he is emasculated. In order to escape the threat of being unmanned, he defies fate and chooses a course of action that he knows must end in his defeat.**

**I**

First impressions are important. Even if not always correct, they are the stuff out of which our later opinions are fashioned. They may be confirmed, altered, or rejected, but in each case they must be explained. It is for this reason that our first glimpses of Shakespeare's major characters are invariably instructive. The description
we first hear of Macbeth may or may not be accurate, but the very anonymity of the Captain who utters it as a report to the king of the battle against the rebel Macdonwald, coupled with the fact that the king readily believes it, is an indication that the description is a fair rendering of what Macbeth is generally reputed to be.

    For brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name—
    Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel,
    Which smoked with bloody execution,
    Like valor's minion carved out his passage
    Till he faced the slave;

(1.2.16-20)

Three things strike us immediately. Macbeth is characterized as brave: courage is his signal, and perhaps his single virtue. Second, his courage comes to the fore in a situation in which he defies Fortune—not just chance, but chance deified. Finally, Macbeth is contrasted to the slavish Macdonwald. Courage is the virtue not of slaves but of masters. Macbeth's courage has something to do with his capacity to master a chancy situation.

Courage is the central issue of the play. This becomes clearer once we see the connection among courage, bravery, and valor on the one hand, and the staggering frequency of references to manhood, being a man, not being womanly, etc., on the other. Shakespeare writes in a tradition in which courage is the manly virtue par excellence. This tradition has its roots in the literature and philosophy of Greek antiquity in which the word for courage, *andreia*, also means manliness, and in which among the fundamental cosmic principles of opposition we find male and female. The former is the active principle, the latter passive—so much so that the female body is thought to provide only the raw material for nourishment and growth of the fetus. The male sperm provides everything else. In Aristotle the existence of an ordered cosmos is owing to the imposition of form (the male principle) on matter (the female principle)—something purely potential, purely passive. To say that Macbeth is courageous, then, means that he takes matters into his own hands, that he seizes opportunities—potentialities—that he does not passively let fortune guide him but disdains it with his brandished steel.

The deeper implications of *Macbeth* require an understanding of the meaning of courage and manliness within the play. A variety of possibilities come to the fore. "I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none" (1.7.46-47). At the beginning Macbeth holds a very classical notion of the nature of courage. There are limits placed on human action. To cross these limits means to become something nonhuman—whether subhuman or superhuman. At the same time, he shows a grudging admiration for his wife who is not put off by the prospect of crossing these limits. "Bring forth men-children only; / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" (1.7.72-74). This strange woman is the first to emphasize the connection between courage and being the most manly of males, but it is a view shared by Macbeth. After Duncan's body has been discovered, when Macbeth wishes to give the appearance of strength and virtue he suggests that those present meet again after they have "put on manly readiness" (2.3.135). And later he taunts the murderers into agreeing to attack Banquo by suggesting that if they do not avenge themselves they are less than men:

    First Murderer: We are men, my liege.
    Macbeth: Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men;
    As hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs,
    Shoughs, water-rugs and demi-wolves, are clept
    All by the name of dogs: the valued file
    Distinguishes the swift, the slow, the subtle,
    The housekeeper, the hunter, every one
    According to the gift which bounteous nature
Manhood is thus not simply generic; it does not simply distinguish one class of beings from another. It does this, but it also provides the basis for a hierarchy among men. To be a real man is to be more than a mere man, and to be a real man means above all to take one's fate and one's honor into one's own hands even to the point of being reckless enough "to spite the world" and risk death.

This understanding of the connection between manhood and courage is confirmed in what follows in the play with one interesting exception. Upon hearing of the death of his wife and children at the hands of Macbeth, Macduff is told by Malcolm to "dispute it like a man." He replies, "I shall do so; / but I must also feel it as a man" (4.3.220-21). In other words, he must suffer it like a man; he must be passive for a time in order to place his actions in the proper context. This exception deserves some attention. It is the one moment in the play when the identity of courage and manliness is explicitly questioned. And yet in this context Macduff's passivity is perceived by Malcolm as a weakness. And Macduff himself, after letting "grief / Convert to anger" (4.3.228-29), characterizes his grief as womanly, although he does not for that reason regret having shown it. In other words, this exception is seen as an exception. Feeling grief like a man means acting like a woman. Shakespeare chooses to abstract from this more moderate and sensible view of human life as some mixture of manliness and womanliness, of activity and passivity; he does so because he wishes to teach us something about manliness by showing us its most extreme, and at the same time most consistent, form. For this reason the dominant view of manliness remains fairly expressed in the speech that announces the death of the young Siward.

Your son, my lord, has paid a soldier's debt:
He only lived but till he was a man;
The which no sooner had his prowess confirmed

In the unshrinking station where he fought,
But like a man he died.

(5.8.39-43)
Young Siward's manliness consists in facing almost certain death, knowing it, and still "to spite the world" continuing.

That Macbeth is under the spell of this view of courage is clear from the last scene. Having just learned that Macduff is not of woman born Macbeth says, "it hath cowed my better part of man"; that is, it has momentarily deprived him of courage (5.8.18). Courage is the better part of man. Macbeth's last words are "And damned be him that first cries' Hold enough!'" (5.8.34). Damnation, and so salvation, apparently have to do primarily with one's conduct in battle. The worst of all sins is to say "uncle."

Macduff too is an advocate of courage. "[F]ront to front / Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself; / Within my sword's length set him. If he escape, / Heaven forgive him too!" (4.3.232-35). Malcolm's reply to this declaration is "This time goes manly" (4.3.235). Should Macbeth prevail in battle, Macduff, whose wife and children have been brutally slaughtered, is willing to see their slaughterer forgiven. We have already seen Malcolm call upon Macduff to cure his grief with revenge like a man. We also see that Siward, the old soldier, hears of his son's death, and can only think to ask whether he received his wounds in front like a man or behind like a coward (5.8.46). But the most striking statement of this cult of manliness comes from a woman, Lady Macbeth. First she taunts her husband with the charge of cowardice in order to persuade him to murder Duncan. "And live a coward in thine own esteem, / Letting' I dare not'wait upon' I would" (1.7.43-44). And shortly thereafter: "When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man" (1.7.49-51). This view of courage as the highest of human possibilities is held at least in part by all the major characters in Macbeth save the one singled out for her womanliness, Lady Macduff, and the one singled out for his saintliness, Edward, the pious king of England. Our first impression is that the play is a great praise of the virtue courage. Macbeth more consistently than anyone else takes his bearings by the reduction of human virtue to courage that is implied in the identification of courage and manliness. Why then is the tragedy his? Macbeth may be justly punished for his excess, but this excess is rooted in his consistency.

If Macbeth is, as its full title suggests, a tragedy, then there ought to be something redeeming in the man Macbeth. He cannot be simply cruel, ambitious, blood-thirsty, and tyrannical. Macbeth is in the deepest sense a tragedy because it presents us with a man who does possess a virtue but of such a kind and to such a degree that he dares do all that may become a man and as a result ends up less than a man. We are presented with the spectacle of one virtue pushed to such an extreme that it ceases to be virtue. Macbeth's tragedy is the tragedy of courage. To make this claim plausible requires that something be said about the peculiar structure of courage.

Courage is the virtue of action, of nonpassivity, of taking one's fate into one's own hands. At the same time, however, it is a reactive virtue. It is not possible to be courageous unless one is in some sense threatened. As a virtue the purpose of which is conquest, its success is simultaneously its failure. It is not accidental that this play almost begins with the famous lines, "Fair is foul and foul is fair." The goal or end toward which courage tends is victory, but victory creates conditions under which there is no longer any outlet for courage. Courage is the martial virtue. But, as Aristotle puts it, "War is for the sake of peace." In war every effort is made in the name of victory, but this very victory deprives the warrior of his pre-eminence.

To say that courage is reactive and at the same time the virtue of action is to say that human action is at its best reactive. It is always geared to the overcoming of obstacles. All of this is quite interesting but not as yet particularly tragic so long as we make war in order to enjoy peace. But for Macbeth whose essence is his courage, this structure portends an unceasing drive to overcome obstacles, which, because they are finite, must cease to be obstacles as soon as they are overcome. His courage thus requires that he seek out ever new obstacles, obstacles, which once overcome, are recorded for us by the train of dead bodies he leaves in his wake. He is first concerned only to kill Duncan, thereby becoming king. But he is not content with having the throne; he must have it so securely that it cannot be wrested from him. This desire for security takes the form.
of attempting to prevent even death from causing him to lose the throne. Macbeth thus seeks to secure the
kingship for his offspring. This was so far from being a part of his original ambition that the very prophets
who assured him he would be king also assured him that his sons would not be. Macbeth's concern for his
children cannot be understood as a natural paternal desire to assure the well-being of his offspring. There are
as yet no children, or at least if there are they are so minimized as individuals that they are never mentioned in
the play even by this worried father.11

Macbeth is a man in search of a foe. With each success he becomes less content. Had he simply desired the
throne he could have made his reign relatively secure in the way taken by the Macbeth of the source for this
play, Holinshed's *Chronicles.*12 That is, he could have ruled more justly, or at least more moderately.13 The
real Macbeth ruled for seventeen years, ten of which were wholly untroubled. No, our Macbeth desires more
than the throne. He seeks an obstacle so great that he will not have to seek another, but that must mean one so
great that, while ensuring the continuance of his manliness, it will thwart his victory.

We are confronted with a dilemma. If it is the core of our natures to attempt to overcome obstacles, either they
can be overcome, in which case we will have nothing left to do—we are unmanned; or they cannot be
overcome, in which case we wonder why we should make an attempt—we are again unmanned. In either case,
we, who wish to be courageous, are rendered impotent. What may perhaps save us is that we do not
know—cannot know—whether victory or defeat awaits us.

The play that is concerned with courage is also concerned with tyranny, and not accidentally. Shakespeare is
not the only one to have seen the tyrannic impulse as the extreme version of the desire to be master of one's
fate. Nor is he the only one to have seen the tragic implications of tyranny.14 Xenophon's *Hiero* teaches that
the tyrant will be less free to do what he wills than most men; he will be hated, and so his freedom of
movement will be restricted from fear of assassination, and, because he will be envied he will be in no
position to distinguish real friends from artful flatterers. The tyrant will be able to trust no one.15 Hegel also
illustrates the self-defeating character of the tyrannic impulse. We seek to master others, to enslave them,
because we seek their recognition. But what we really want is their recognition freely given. Our very acts of
conquest, while ensuring recognition, at the same time, by enslaving opponents, makes their recognition
worthless.16 Here, too, fair is foul.

But Shakespeare goes deeper. One might reply to Xenophon as Machiavelli would have. If a tyrant is clever
enough, he need not be hated.17 And one might reply to Hegel that tyranny is only tragic if what is desired is
recognition and not mastery for its own sake. Shakespeare wants to show that tyranny is necessarily tragic
because, as the extreme form of courage, it is what it is by virtue of overcoming obstacles. Its complete
success would put it out of business.

Shakespeare does not mean to suggest that this most extreme form of tyranny is possible. For it to be so, more
than other human beings would have to be mastered. Yet because he does wish to proceed for a time with the
pretense of its possibility, he is forced to enlist the aid of preternatural beings on Macbeth's behalf. This is
instructive for two reasons. First, it enables us to see that if courage could be pushed to its extreme form, it
would prove tragic. Second, by introducing conditions for this extreme form of courage that are on the one
hand necessary and on the other admittedly impossible, Shakespeare shows us just why complete mastery is
impossible. With that it is necessary to turn to the role of the witches in the play.

II

Courage may consist in disdaining fortune, but Macbeth places trust in fortune-tellers. He is aware early on
that: "If chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me, / Without my stir" (1.3.143–44). From the
moment he entertains this possibility, the manly Macbeth begins his submission to the "powers of darkness"
and is unmanned. There is a great temptation to interpret the witches away—to understand them as a
powerful, if subliminal, force in Macbeth's psyche. To surrender to this temptation is to miss the point. The immediate evidence of the play is that the witches are independent of Macbeth, not in his soul. The witches always precede Macbeth on stage. They appear to Banquo as well as Macbeth. There are certainly examples of visions which appear to Macbeth alone, and which are therefore intentionally of uncertain status. Both the dagger of act 2, scene 1 and the ghost of Banquo in act 3, scene 4 are clearly meant to be taken in this ambiguous fashion. The witches are not. It is their very independence and their connection to fortune (Holinshed hints that they may be the goddesses of destiny) that set up the crucial tension between Macbeth and fortune. A fully adequate analysis of the play would require a complete interpretation of the witches. In lieu of that, it will be helpful to concentrate on what the witches bring to the play, prophecy, and its connection to the problem of courage.

On the surface, one who disdains fortune should have no truck with fortune-tellers. Macbeth feels this tension, and so his attitude toward the witches is throughout the play equivocal. On the one hand, he acts out of the belief that what they say is true; on the other hand, he acts on his own in order to be doubly sure. Having just heard that he cannot be harmed by any man of woman born, and taking that to mean that no man can harm him, Macbeth nevertheless resolves to kill Macduff to "make assurance double sure, / And take a bond of fate" (4.1.83-84). This attitude is certainly understandable—no use taking chances. At the same time, however, it is patently ridiculous. To know one's fate is to neutralize chance. To think that prophecy needs assurances is to doubt that it is prophecy. In Macbeth's case this means to call into question all of the motives for what he has done and for what he plans to do. Macbeth decides to murder Banquo because the witches have foretold that Banquo's heirs will rule Scotland. He believes them enough to worry about Banquo, but not enough to give up all attempts to forestall the future they predict. He doubts and does not doubt that what they say about the future is correct. As Macbeth's attitude toward the prophecy is equivocal, it is poetic justice that the prophecy itself should turn out to be equivocal.

The question of equivocation, mentioned explicitly only twice, deserves closer scrutiny. Its occurrence late in the play is fairly straightforward. Having just seen Birnam Wood beginning to move toward Dunsinane, Macbeth says: "I pull in resolution, and begin / To doubt th'equivocations of the fiend / That lies like truth . . ." (5.5.42-44). An equivocation appears to speak with one voice but really speaks with two. Birnam Wood, not actually moving to Dunsinane, is still sort of moving to Dunsinane. The prophecy is ambiguous. (There is, of course, a more serious difficulty with Macbeth's view of prophecy. He traffics with preternatural beings, beings who do things no man can do, and yet it does not occur to him for a moment that, having defied the ordinary course of nature in one respect, they might well be able to do so in other respects. If you put part of your faith in preternatural beings, it does not seem very clever to put the rest of it in natural laws. Beings who can foretell the future might just be able to make trees move.) The crucial word here is equivocation. To understand what Shakespeare has in mind when using it we must turn to act 2, scene 3, a scene often noticed for its humor, but too seldom for its meaning.

Shakespeare draws our attention to a parallel between prophecy and drinking. Both equivocate. The equivocation is not spelled out with regard to prophecy, but it is spelled out with regard to drinking. The drunken porter tells Macduff that drink is notorious for three things—nose painting, sleep, and urine, but:

Lechery, sir, it provokes and unprovokes; it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance: therefore much drink may be said to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him and it mars him; it sets him on and it takes him off; it persuades him and it disheartens him; makes him stand to and not stand to; in conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and giving him the lie, leaves him. (2.3.31-38)

Drink provokes desire and at the same time causes impotence.
Prophecy has a similar structure. It plants desire in Macbeth, and at the same time makes it impossible to fulfill this desire. Both drink and prophecy arouse and emasculate, and do so not by dint of any easily resolved ambiguity in their natures. It is not that part of drink, or prophecy, arouses, and part emasculates. No, the very same thing that heightens our desire renders us unable to achieve the object of our desire. Drink and prophecy are not part fair and part foul but simultaneously fair and foul.

To tell Macbeth that he will become king is to tell him that regardless of what he does he will become king. In the meantime, however, he still has to act. He is alive. The choice of letting himself be crowned without his stir is not a real choice. Since he must do something, not stirring is not a real alternative. But this man of action, of manliness, has been placed in a situation in which, whatever he does, his fate is sealed. Accordingly, he cannot think of himself as taking his fate into his own hands. To be favored by fortune is fine, but to be favored by fortune and told about it in advance is an insult to his manhood. Courage is the virtue of action, but to be worthy actions must have some consequence. It might seem ideal to know in advance what the consequences of one's actions will be. Yet to know in advance what the future holds, and at the same time know that a variety of courses of action appear open, must lead to the conclusion that one's particular choice of action is inconsequential, and if inconsequential not worthy, and if not worthy not virtuous. Foreknowledge, which appears to ensure courage, in the end makes it impossible to consider oneself courageous. Macbeth is indeed "valor's minion." He who appears to be the favorite of courage is in fact the slave of courage.

Faced from the beginning with the prospect of enslavement, the manly Macbeth is bound to rebel. Because the witches are agents of his enslavement, they are the targets of his rebellion, a rebellion at first only partial but in the end total. Macbeth has two choices. He may accede to the prophecy, that is, to emasculation, or he may fight what he knows from the outset to be a losing battle. He chooses the latter.

I'gin to be aweary of the sun,  
And wish th'estate o'th'world were now undone.  
Ring the alarum bell! Blow wind, come wrack!  
At least we'll die with harness on our back.

(5.5.49-52)

And his last words:

Though Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane,  
And thou opposed, being of no woman born,  
Yet I will try the last. Before my body  
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff;  
And damned be him that first cries "Hold, enough!"

(5.8.30-34)

Hecate, the top witch, has seen this coming all along:

And, which is worse, all you [the other witches] have done  
Hath been but for a wayward son,  
Spiteful and wrathful; who, as others do,  
Loves for his own ends, not for you.

(3.5.10-13)
And so she punishes Macbeth, but the raw materials for that punishment are already available in human nature.

And that distilled by magic sleights
Shall raise such artificial sprites
As by the strength of their illusion
Shall draw him on to his confusion.
He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear
His hopes'bove wisdom, grace, and fear:
And you all know security
Is mortals'chiefest enemy.

(3.5.26-33)

Security is mortals'chiefest enemy because only when threatened by insecurity can mortals exert themselves, and only by exerting themselves can they fulfill themselves. Yet paradoxically, mortals treat security as though it were their greatest friend, and must do so. "To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus—" (3.1.48). All exertion is directed toward security, the very thing that makes exertion unnecessary. This thought is unwittingly expressed by Macbeth himself when asking the murderer about the success of the attack on Banquo and Fleance: "Banquo's safe?" (3.4.26). In the context, to be safe is to be dead.

Macbeth's rebellion began early. His very action to gain and hold the kingship secure is in its way a rebellion. What has only been implicit, however, becomes explicit in his second go-around with the witches. At the beginning of act 4 Macbeth appears as one accustomed to command. He who ought to be the supplicant acts imperiously. Macbeth attempts to command the return of the first apparition, and having asked the witches, not very politely, to tell him whether Banquo's heirs will ever rule in Scotland, he meets their response, an apparition, brusquely. "Thou art too like the spirit of Banquo. Down!" (4.1.112). Macbeth attempts to regain control over his own future by commanding the fortune-tellers. Earlier in act 3 he had responded to the prospect of Banquo's heirs ruling with the following words. "To make them kings, the seeds of Banquo kings! / Rather than so, come, fate, into the list, / And champion me to th'utterance!" (3.1.70-72).

Macbeth challenges fate and, of course, fails. Knowing that damnation consists in giving up the fight, renouncing courage and ceasing to consider oneself master of one's own fate, Macbeth sees only one way of avoiding it—"damned [be] all those that trust them! [the witches]" (4.1.139). But Macbeth has trusted them. If he had not, and did not continue to do so, his wrath against them would be unintelligible. Only because he believes what they say does he find it necessary to challenge them. Macbeth's attitude toward the prophecy is to the end equivocal, and necessarily so.

III

Macbeth is a tragic figure for two reasons. His virtue, courage, when pushed to its extreme is self-annihilating. And his belief in the prophecy is incompatible with his courage, and so with his self-esteem. Still, it is legitimate to ask why courage need be pushed to the extreme, and why we need worry about things like prophecy. A play that touches us so deeply must be based on a foundation more accessible and more generally applicable than the prophecy of witches. It is therefore necessary to find some means of connecting the questions of prophecy and courage in such a way as to show that the essence of the tragedy of courage is displayed most clearly by means of a consideration of the effects of prophecy. The means will be time, and in particular what it means for human beings to be temporal beings.

Prophecy turns the temporal order topsy-turvy. Lady Macbeth, upon receiving a letter from her husband describing his first meeting with the witches puts it very well. "Thy letters have transported me beyond / This
ignorant present, and I feel now / The future in the instant" (1.5.57-59). To say that the present is always ignorant is only to say the commonplace. The specifics of our futures may at times seem very probable, but we are never really sure that some chance event might not intervene to frustrate our hopes and ambitions. This precariousness of human life generally is not exactly caused by the fact that we are temporal creatures; it is rather part of what it means to be a temporal creature. Hope, anxiety, ambition—these are signs that we are never sure of our fates. Prophecy would destroy the open-endedness of the future present in the instant. The problem of time enters with the witches. The play literally opens with the word "when," and the first problem the witches set for themselves is a temporal problem. Perhaps more instructive is the manner in which they initially present themselves to Macbeth.

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!  
All hail, Macbeth, Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!  
All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter!  

(1.3.48-50)

This is not simply prophecy; it is not concerned only with the future. The first two salutations are emphatically addressed to Macbeth rather than being descriptions of him. They represent his past and his present. He is addressed as Glamis, which he has been for some time, and as Cawdor, which he has just become, but only rather matter of factly described as the king he will be. While the first two salutations may be understood as according to Macbeth the customary respect due his titles, the last leaves some doubt whether the respect due the person of a king is something to which Macbeth is entitled. Macbeth is certainly more taken with the prophecy. (He of course takes the salutation as Thane of Cawdor as a prediction because he is as yet unaware of what Duncan has done. This is itself important, since we are always in a sense unaware of the present until we have reflected upon it, and by then it is past.) But the implications of the prophecy do not escape the more sober Banquo.

If you can look into the seeds of time,  
And say which grain will grow and which will not,  
Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear  
Your favors nor your hate.  

(1.3.58-61)

The witches must represent time past, present, and future because the future is not independent of the past. Time has seeds. Events done in the present grow in the soil of past events and have consequences for the future. Macbeth grows to understand this better as the play progresses. "Come what come may, / Time and the hour runs through the roughest day" (1.3.146-47). And later in act 1:

If it were done when' tis done, then' twere well  
It were done quickly. If th'assassination  
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch,  
With his surcease, success; that but this blow  
Might be the be-all and end-all—here,  
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,  
We'd jump the life to come.  

(1.7.1-7)

The "life to come" can, but need not, mean the life to come after this life. It may also mean that actions in the present have consequences. They shape the possibilities open to us in our futures. It is not so easy to "Let
every man be master of his time" (3.1.40).

The entire play subsequent to the regicide may be described in terms of Macbeth's struggle against the consequences of his earlier actions. His battle is not so much a battle for a specific future as a battle against the past. And yet his every attempt to right the situation sinks him deeper into enslavement by the past. Since Macbeth's actions are reactions to situations growing from his previous actions, his attempts to free himself—to assert his independence and manhood—bind him to the past even more slavishly.

Lady Macbeth realizes the impossibility of the situation long before Macbeth.

Nought's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content:
’Tis safer to be that which we destroy
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.
How now, my lord! Why do you keep alone,
Of sorriest fancies your companions making,
Using those thoughts which should indeed have died
With them they think on? Things without all remedy
Should be without regard: what's done is done.

(3.2.4-12)

That there are things without remedy, and in particular that these are paradigmatically the things of the past, flies in the face of Macbeth's own understanding of his manliness. The final and overwhelming obstacle to Macbeth's courage is the past, and its apparently commonsensical rule uttered by a madwoman, "What's done cannot be undone" (5.1.71).

Macbeth's flirtation with prophecy is first a symptom of his desire to overcome the fundamental insecurity of not knowing what the future holds for him. He wishes to be master of his time, but this means that he must seek to overcome his nature as temporal. Security, which is "mortals'chiefest enemy," is at the same time the object of mortals'chief desire, a desire that can only be satisfied if it is possible to be sure of the consequences of one's actions. Security is mortals'chief enemy, however, because to be mortal is to be in that precarious and endangered position of being threatened, and so attempting to gain security. Life consists in the activity of reacting to this threat. When the threat is gone, so is life understood in this way. If courage is the paradigmatic human virtue, then it is the human plight to pursue an object all the while knowing that if the pursuit is successful, all that is desirable in human life vanishes with the victory.

Macbeth's equivocation is thus not simply the result of a fantastic and imaginary situation. While prophecy is at most a very unlikely matter of concern for us, the mere consideration of its possibility leads us to see that the temporal conditions necessary for an act of the most extreme courage, an act that attempts to overcome the source of human insecurity, would require an attack on the condition of this insecurity, time. Such an attack must fail because the attempt to assure our futures at the same time makes us prisoners of our pasts. Put most simply, if courage is virtue, human life is tragic. In Macbeth we see this tragedy acted out. It can only be acted out if the impossible—prophecy—is made possible, if "nothing is / But what is not" (1.3.141-42). It may be unlikely that a real human being will ever run out of obstacles to overcome, but real human beings can think through this tragedy, and so realize that life understood in terms of courage is tragic. Courage, in principle, leads to impotence, or in more familiar language, to nihilism, that state in which, because everything is permitted, nothing is desired.
Nietzsche describes nihilism as the resolution rather to will nothing than not to will at all. Macbeth fits this Nietzschean description. Pressed by his wife to forget the past since "what's done cannot be undone," Macbeth refuses to submit to this law of time. He tries to compel fortune by compelling the fortunetellers, and when this fails, he defies fortune knowing it will mean his death. He wills nothing rather than not will at all—a final effort to assert his manliness in a world that can only mock the attempt.

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, . . .
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.

(5.5.19-28)

Epilogue

We are still left to ask what all of this has to do with us. We are not terribly tempted to speak of courage as the paradigmatic virtue. Indeed, we are tempted not to speak of virtue at all. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is of importance to us because we are heirs to a tradition that understands man as enveloped in a hostile atmosphere, alienated from the world, and at his best in the battle to overcome this estrangement. If this battle is in principle capable of being won, then either man will no longer be at his best, or he will no longer be man. If the battle against a hostile nature is in principle not capable of being won, it is not at all clear why it ought to be fought. To take our bearings by attempting to overcome a hostile nature is inevitably to be caught between Scylla and Charybdis. If we cannot win we lose, and if we can win we lose. It is appropriate that the first scene of *Macbeth* should contain the line "When the hurlyburly's done, / When the battle's lost and won." if life is understood as a battle, winning is losing.

Two options seem open to us if we are to understand human life as other than tragic. One is suggested by Shakespeare. There are two kinds of prophecy in Macbeth. One comes from the "powers of darkness"; it is satanic and tempts Macbeth to be more than a man, to be like a god. The other is a "heavenly gift" (4.3.157) and is practiced by Edward of England. This passing reference to Edward, coupled with the fact that it is Edward who supports Malcolm in restoring Scotland to normalcy, is an indication of an alternative understanding of man as not confronted with a hostile nature but as living within a beneficent nature. The appropriate response, then, is not courage but something like piety. Put less gracefully, it is not so bad to be a slave. To fill out this suggestion would require another reading of the play, keeping in mind that the alternative to manliness is womanliness and that the two need not be understood as incompatible.

The alternative was understood most powerfully by Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche, on the one hand understanding the necessity of some fixed and eternal standards for our action (security) and on the other hand understanding the tragic implications of such standards for our non-fixed and non-eternal lives (security is mortals' chiefest enemy), sought to elaborate a doctrine that combined the eternal and the temporal and thus satisfied both human needs—the need for security and the need for insecurity. Nietzsche did this by attempting to make the sequence of temporal events itself eternal in the sense of eternally recurring. His solution intentionally violates that temporal law according to which "what's done is done" without sacrificing its other formulation "what's done cannot be undone." By reinterpreting the rigid separation of past, present, and future time, Nietzsche attempts to make it possible to overcome our enslavement to the past. By willing our future we are simultaneously willing our past and so, in a paradoxical manner, determining what we have
already become. Difficult as it is, Nietzsche's teaching of the eternal return is not lunacy. It is a bold attempt to avoid the tragic implications we have seen sketched out in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, not by rethinking the importance of courage but by rethinking the structure of time.

But perhaps there is a third way—a combination of the manliness of Macbeth and the womanliness of Edward. Uncovering the underlying conditions of human life in which we have no choice but to acquiesce requires a certain boldness. Understanding this togetherness of moderation and madness would help us to take the measure of our most philosophical poet.

**Notes**

This essay, in a slightly different form, was originally published in *Essays from the Faculty*, Sarah Lawrence College (February 1979). It owes a great deal to Jose Benardete's fine article "Macbeth's Last Words" (*Interpretation* 1 [Summer 1970]: 63-75), as well as to several conversations with Richard Kennington on the question of equivocation in *Macbeth*. I would also like to thank my daughter Jessica Davis for her help in preparing the typescript.


2 Compare this with Niccolò Machiavelli's advice to princes in chapter 25 of *The Prince*: "fortune is a woman; and it is necessary, if one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike her down" (trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985], 101).


5 Aristotle *On the Generation of Animals* 730a-b.

6 For other instances of the connection between manliness and courage see 2.3.111; 3.4.59, 66, 74, 80, 100, 109; 4.2.66, 76; 5.2.4, 11; 5.3.6; 5.5.6.

7 Compare with Plato *Republic* 474b-476a.

8 See Benardete, "Macbeth's Last Words," 63-65.

9 The importance of Lady Macbeth for the meaning of the play must be clear to any interpreter. She is especially important in an interpretation based on the distinction between manliness and womanliness. Like the witches, who appear to be female and yet have beards, Lady Macbeth has an ambiguous sexual status. She explicitly unsexes herself (1.5.42). That the statement of the cult of manliness should come from an unsexed being is of some interest. It may well point to the instability of manliness or courage. To be manly is always on the way toward being something else. Benardete suggests that "if Lady Macbeth unsexes herself, Macbeth may be said to dehumanize himself ("Macbeth's Last Words," 71).

10 Aristotle *Politics* 1333a35. For the extreme modern view see Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "On War and Warriors," where Zarathustra says, "it is the good war that hallows any cause" (*The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Viking Press, 1954]), 159.

11 There would be little doubt that there are no children were it not for what Lady Macbeth says at 1.7.54-55—"I have given suck, and know / How tender'tis to love a babe that milks me." At 4.3.216 Macduff
says of Macbeth, "He has no children." The apparent contradiction does not really weaken the point here. Even if Macbeth does, or did, have children, his silence about them makes it clear that he is not thinking about them in any but the most abstract of ways when he plans to murder Banquo.

12 Barnet, Macbeth, 145.

13 Compare this with the discussion between Macduff and Malcolm in act 4, scene 3, where Shakespeare makes it clear that he is aware of, and has thought through, the possibility of a more sober variety of tyranny.

14 Compare the account of tyranny in books 8 and 9 of Plato's Republic as well as Gorgias 471aff.

15 For this see the whole of the Hiero, and the interpretation of it by Leo Strauss in On Tyranny (Glencoe, 111.: Free Press, 1963).


17 See chapter 19 of Machiavelli's Prince.

18 That Macbeth knows this is obvious from 3.4.124.

19 Compare Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics 1116al - 25.

20 See Benardete, "Macbeth's Last Words," 74.

21 Note the double entendre.

22 Emphasis mine.

23 Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, 3.1 and 3.28.

24 The speech is made on the occasion of the death of Lady Macbeth. Her death is announced by Macbeth's servant, Seyton, pronounced as Satan.

25 Despite their obvious differences, two of the great prophets of the nineteenth century, Marx and Nietzsche, see the problem of modern man in terms remarkably similar to these. For Nietzsche man is at a crossroads and must become either more (der Uebermensch) or less (der letzte Mensch) than he has been. In Marx, postrevolutionary man is necessarily radically different from prerevolutionary man since the latter is what he is by virtue of the class struggle, which is abolished by the revolution.

26 Compare this with the subtitle of Nietzsche's Ecce Homo—"Wie man wird was man ist," or "How one becomes what one is." The attempt to eternalize the sequence of temporal events is an attempt at once to maintain and to deny the distinction between being and becoming.

Arthur Kirsch (essay date 1984)


[In the essay below, Kirsch brings together Augustinian theology, Renaissance moral essays, and Freudian psychology to explore the nature of Macbeth's ambitious desires. He sees the hero's aspirations as both a sinful fantasy of god-like omnipotence and an expression of infantile narcissism, he also emphasizes the
Macbeth is the most self-centered of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, and not coincidentally, it seems to me, the one with the least amplitude of spirit. All of Shakespeare's great tragic figures are isolated in a universe essentially of their own imagination and thought, but in none of them is such isolation so inordinate and destructive an expression of egoism as it is in Macbeth. Macbeth relentlessly pursues what he thinks of as his "own good" (III.iv.134), but the more he does so the more he seems impelled by an infantile combination of helplessness and rage. At the end Malcolm calls him a "dead butcher" (V.ix.35). No other major Shakespearean hero has anything approaching such an epitaph, and if it hardly does justice to Macbeth's tragic experience, it nonetheless discriminates a deflationary undercurrent that runs through the language and action of the entire play. An appetite for blood is associated with Macbeth's valor before he ever appears on stage, and he is presented in postures and images that diminish him and emphasize his weakness as that appetite intensifies. Mary McCarthy's charge that "he is old Iron Pants in the field" but that "at home" Lady Macbeth "has to wear the pants" is only slightly outrageous: his frequent domination by his wife is symptomatic. His ambition provokes desires in him that he is increasingly incapable of satisfying, like the impotent drunkenness the Porter describes, and he seems from the first "cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears" (III.iv.23-24).

In my own view these characteristics make Macbeth a peculiarly difficult hero to sympathize with, let alone admire, but they are in any case central to his tragedy, and they should be dealt with in their own terms, not sentimentalized, ignored, or turned on their heads. An illuminating way to begin is to focus upon Macbeth's ambition and fear, the two emotions or drives—"passions of the mind," as they were called in the Renaissance—that most dominate him, usually simultaneously, and that constitute the deepest as well as most ostensive manifestations of his self-absorption. These two passions are familiar topics in criticism of Macbeth, but they have almost always been treated in relatively restricted contexts. They deserve a wider view, because in their widest sense, the sense they eventually have in the play, ambition and fear comprise a large measure of normal human experience as well as the experience of Macbeth and have particularly rich implications in Christian thought as well as in both Renaissance and modern psychology.

In the moral literature of the Renaissance ambition rarely had positive connotations. It was almost always conceived of as a threat to hierarchy and therefore as a disorder within the individual, as well as within the family and the state, with which the human soul was held to be analogous. Macbeth refers to this idea and its analogies when he refers to the shaking of his "single state of man" (I.iii.140) by his ambitious and murderous thoughts and when he later pledges his fealty to Duncan, saying that his "service," "loyalty," and "duties" are to Duncan's "throne and state, children and servants" (I.iv.22, 24). Lady Macbeth makes a similar speech, with more spiritual connotations, when she associates duty and hierarchy with the parable of the talents, with God's parentage of human life (I.vi.25ff). The pledges to Duncan are hyperbolic, if not hypocritical, but all three speeches nonetheless reflect the premise that a man's identity is defined by his place and by his inner willingness to submit to its limits and obligations. Analogies among the bonds of obedience between God and man, sovereign and subject, parent and child, master and servant, and reason and passion are commonplace in the Elizabethan period. In a universe so conceived, ambition is inescapably associated with primal images of usurpation: with the diabolic envy and usurpation upon God of Satan's rebellion, as well as with the presumption and disobedience within the soul of man at the fall. "Ambition and desire to be aloft" were also inevitably associated with unnatural rebellion within the family as well as the kingdom: "the brother often to seeke and often to worke the death of his brother; the sonne of the father, the father to seeke or procure the death of his sons." The "Homily against disobedience and wil-full Rebellion" adds, in words that could serve as at least a partial epigraph for Macbeth, that "where most rebellions and rebelles bee; there is the expresse similitude of hell, and the rebelues themselves are the verie figures of fiendes and devils."
St. Augustine calls the pride from which man's and Satan's rebellion resulted "a perverse desire of height," and his discussion both of the nature of this desire and of its consequences is extremely germane to an understanding of Macbeth's aspirations. "What is pride," Augustine writes, "but a perverse desire of height, in forsaking Him to whom the soul ought solely to cleave, as the beginning thereof, to make itself seem its own beginning. This is when it likes itself too well, or when it so loves itself that it will abandon that unchangeable Good which ought to be more delightful to it than itself." Since man was created of nothing, Augustine continues, he was "lessened in excellence" at the fall: by "leaving Him to adhere to and delight in himself, he grew not to be nothing, but towards nothing." The devil said to Adam and Eve,

"Ye shall be as gods": which they might sooner have been by obedience and coherence with their Creator than by proud opinion that they were their own beginners; for the created gods are not gods of themselves but by participation of the God that made them; but man desiring more became less, and choosing to be sufficient in himself fell from the all-sufficient God.

The just reward, Augustine concludes, that Adam and Eve received for "desiring more" was the perpetuation of the paradox of that desire:

What is man's misery other than his own disobedience to himself: that seeing he would not what he might, now he cannot what he would? For although in paradise all was not in his power during his obedience, yet then he desired nothing but what was in his power, and so did what he would. But now, as the scripture says, and we see by experience, "Man is like to vanity." For who can recount his innumerable desires of impossibilities?  

An interest in the peculiar futility and suffering that Augustine associates with human ambition and aspiration can be seen early in Shakespeare's career in *The Rape of Lucrece*, a work that anticipates *Macbeth* and is perhaps its most deeply suggestive source. Though the poem's ostensive subject is rape, it is actually preoccupied with ambition. Tarquin's resolve to possess Lucrece is repeatedly and explicitly associated with envy, usurpation, and ambition at the same time that it is treated as a violent instance of man's general perversity in "desiring more." The prose argument and early lines of the poem make clear that Tarquin is provoked to desire Lucrece in the first place because of his "envy" of her husband Collatine's possessing "so rich a thing" (39), and this underlying motive is given acute emphasis just before the rape, as Tarquin views Lucrece's sleeping figure:

Her breasts like ivory globes circled with blue,  
A pair of maiden worlds unconquered;  
Save of their lord, no bearing yoke they knew,  
And him by oath they truly honoured.  
These worlds in Tarquin new ambition bred;

Who like a foul usurper went about,  
From this fair throne to heave the owner out.

(407-13)

Shakespeare suggests the Augustinian texture of this "ambition" throughout the poem, but most pointedly and extensively as Tarquin lies in his own bed "revolving / The sundry dangers of his will's obtaining":

Those that much covet are with gain so fond  
That what they have not, that which they possess  
They scatter and unloose it from their bond;  
And so by hoping more they have but less,
Or gaining more, the profit of excess
Is but to surfeit, and such griefs sustain,
That they prove bankrout in this poor rich gain.

So that in vent'ring ill we leave to be
The things we are, for that which we expect;
And this ambitious foul infirmity,
In having much, torments us with defect
Of that we have: so then we do neglect
The thing we have, and all for want of wit,
Make something nothing by augmenting it.

Such hazard now must doting Tarquín make,
Pawning his honor to obtain his lust;
And for himself himself he must forsake

(127-28, 134-40, 148-57)

The same paradoxes are emphasized after the rape, when Tarquín is compared to a drunken and "full-fed" animal: "Drunken desire must vomit his receipt. / Ere he can see his own abomination" (703-04).

There are numerous precise analogies between The Rape of Lucrece and Macbeth. The line, "And for himself himself he must forsake," for example, looks forward suggestively both to Macbeth's fear of knowing himself (II.ii.72) and to his fear that his "single state of man" is literally disintegrating, that parts of his body are separating from him; and Shakespeare describes Tarquín's internal debate before the rape in terms that anticipate the external debate between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth before the murder of Duncan:

Thus graceless holds he disputation
'Tween frozen conscience and hot burning will.

(246-47)

These lines, as well as the whole characterization of Tarquín, lend support to Freud's suggestion that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth "complete" each other as characters, that Shakespeare conceived of them as "disunited parts of a single psychical individuality."9

Beyond these and other specific analogies, however, The Rape of Lucrece deserves emphasis in interpreting Macbeth because it points with unusual explicitness to the broader resonances of the tragedy of human desire that Shakespeare depicts in the Macbeth's whole ambitious "infirmity." The poem makes particularly intelligible the synapses of thought that lead Shakespeare to have Macbeth compare himself to Tarquín just before the murder of Duncan, and to have the Porter, just after the murder, talk of the literal effects of drink upon sexual desire:

Lechery, Sir, it provokes, and unprovokes: it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance. Therefore, much drink may be said to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him, and it mars him; it sets him on, and it takes him off; it persuade him, and disheartens him; makes him stand to, and not stand to; in conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and, giving him the lie, leaves him.

(II.iii.28ff)
The relevance of this bawdy speech to the profoundest movements of the play cannot be exaggerated. The murder of Duncan is saturated with echoes of the aspiring rape of Lucrece and with its larger meaning in Shakespeare's thought and imagination. The Porter recapitulates that meaning precisely and in doing so comments upon the desolate paradoxes of Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's ambitious desires. The equivocations of "Drunken desire" are clearly related to those of the witches' prophecies and to a whole world in which "from that spring, whence comfort seem'd to come, / Discomfort swells" (I.ii.27-28). Shakespeare directly associates the equivocations the Porter describes with the garments of ambition that clothe Macbeth: "Was the hope drunk," Lady Macbeth asks him, with an irony of which she is yet unaware, "Wherein you dressed yourself?" (I.vii.35-36). And there are intimations of the same equivocations, perhaps literalized, in the actual relationship of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. With taunts that seem also to be yearnings, Lady Macbeth provokes Macbeth to be more of a man by killing Duncan, and she calls him "My husband!" (II.ii.13) for the first and only time right after the murder, but the drunken deed which thus seems to give new life to their marriage at the same time empties it. "Nought's had, all's spent, 7 Where our desire is got without content," she cries after Macbeth has attained the crown, "'Tis safer to be that which we destroy, / Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy" (III.ii.4-7). Macbeth enters at exactly the moment Lady Macbeth says these lines, and she suppresses her own thoughts in trying to woo him away from his. But Macbeth is already moving decisively away from her at the same time that he echoes her:

Better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace,
have sent to peace, Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy.

(III.ii. 19-22)

The state of mind, as well as body, that the Porter describes is humorous in a drunk, but in sober (and insomniac) men and women it is hell, which is exactly where Shakespeare locates the Porter and the whole action of the play. The only desire Macbeth and Lady Macbeth subsequently have in common, though they cannot share it, is the desire for extinction.

The suffering that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth depict and endure represents a heightened version of the condition that Renaissance moral philosophers argued was inherent in human passions in general as well as in the passion of ambition in particular. For these commentators, as for earlier Christian writers, all human passions were considered perturbations of the mind, expressions of the "innumerable desires of impossibilities" that caused the fall and constituted man's state forever after it. The passions did not exist when man was at rest in paradise, perfectly at one—at "peace," to use Macbeth's term—with himself and his surroundings, when, in Augustine's words, he "desired nothing but what was in his power, and so did what he would" rather than, as now, what he "cannot." Pierre de la Primaudaye's *The French Academy*, a vast and influential treatise of moral psychology first translated into English in 1586, offers a typical Renaissance elucidation of these assumptions:

THE PHILOSOPHERS teach us by their writings; and experience doth better shew it unto us, that to covet and desire is proper to the soule, and that from thence all the affections and desires of men proceede, which draw them hither and thither diversely, that they may attaine to that thing, which they thinke is able to leade them to the enjoying of some good, whereby they may live a contented and happie life. Which felicitie, the most part of men, through a false opinion, or ignorance rather of that which is good, and by following the inclination of their corrupted nature, do seeke and labor to finde in humane and earthlie things, as in riches, glorie, honor, and pleasure. But forasmuch as the enjoying of these things doth not bring with it sufficient cause of contentation, they perceive themselves alwaies deprived of the end of their desires, and are constrained to wander all their life time beyond all bounds and measure,
according to the rashnes and inconstancie of their lusts. And although they rejoice for a little while at everie new change, yet presently they loath the selfesame thing, which not long before they earnestly desired. Their owne estate alwaies seemeth unto them to be woorest, and everie present condition of life, to be burdensome. From one estate they seeke after another. Ambition, for La Primaudaye, is not merely a species of this general predicament of human desire but in some respects its epitome. "Ambition never suffreth those that have once received hir as a guest, to enjoy their present estate quietly," he remarks in his chapter on that passion,

but maketh them always emptie of goods, and full of hope. It causes them to contemne that, which they have gotten by great paines and travel, and which not long before they desired very earnestly, by reason of their new imaginations and conceites of greater matters, which they continually barke foorth, but never have their minds satisfied & contented. And the more they growe and increase in power and authoritie, the rather are they induced and caried headlong by their affections to commit all kind of injustice, and flatter themselves in furious and frantike actions, that they may come to the end of their infinite platformes. These passages are clearly germane to Macbeth, and in addition to providing suggestive glosses on the peculiar emptiness and insatiability of Macbeth's aspirations, they indicate the exceptional resonance of ambition in the Renaissance. The "infinite platformes" of Macbeth, moreover, comprehend an appalling measure of destructive as well as insatiable aspiration, and beyond his general observations La Primaudaye has a number of particular reflections on ambition that illuminate the sources of this combination in human experience. His comments are extraordinarily apposite to Macbeth. He remarks, citing Plutarch, that "the desire of having more . . . bringeth foorth . . . oftentimes" in ambitious and great lords "an unsociable, cruell, and beastly nature," and he adds,

Further, if (as histories teach us) some have been so wretched & miserable, as to give themselves to the Art of Necromancie, and to contract with the devili, that they might come to soveraigne power and authoritie, what other thing, how strange soever it be, will not they undertake that suffer themselves to be wholly carried away with this vice of ambition? It is ambition that setteth the sonne against the father, and imboldeneth him to seeke his destruction of whom he holdeth his life. This is a remarkable passage. If it was not actually in Shakespeare's mind when he wrote Macbeth, it nonetheless shows striking analogies with the play and discriminates some of its deepest currents of experience. Macbeth, of course, makes a pact with witches, if not the devil; Scotland, as the Porter as well as many others makes clear, becomes an express similitude of hell as a result; and the murder of Duncan "is little else than parricide." It is Lady Macbeth who explicitly says that the king resembled "My father as he slept." (II.ii.13), but she speaks for Macbeth's soul as well, and as I suggested earlier, the association of father and king was in any case inescapable in the Renaissance. It animates as well as haunts Macbeth from the first. What is ultimately most interesting about the motifs of necromancy and parricide in Macbeth, however, is not their presence but their conjunction, (the conjunction, as it were, of Marlowe's Faustus and Tamburlaine), for Shakespeare suggests that the two are deeply connected if not actually functions of each other. This connection, which La Primaudaye states explicitly, seems to me to be at the heart of the play. It is directly related to the dynamics of original sin, the desire for omnipotence that Augustine describes, and at the same time it has precise and illuminating analogues in modern psychological thought. Freud, as is well known, argues that the fantasy of killing and replacing the father is the fulcrum of human psychological development. Less familiar and certainly less actively appreciated is his contention that oedipal guilt can have such potency in human development because for a small child a murderous thought is indistinguishable from a murderous deed, and he traces this magical thinking to the earliest period of infancy. Clinical research has tended to
confirm the presence of this form of thinking in infants, and even psychologists who distrust Freud's concentration upon oedipal rivalry do not generally question his outline of the earlier realm of thought and feeling upon which he argued it depended. In this infantile realm the self is all-encompassing and its platforms do indeed seem infinite, for in an infant's mind distinctions between the self and the outer world tend to dissolve, nature seems animistic, and above all, thoughts seem omnipotent. This, as we shall see, is the necromantic realm that Macbeth inhabits and that accounts for much of his heroic force in the play, because unlike normal civilized adults, unlike even his wife, in whom this earlier world of thinking and feeling is buried, Macbeth is often profoundly conscious of its movements within himself It is the realm, certainly, from which his parricidal impulses stem and which together with those impulses give primitive energy not only to his ambition but to the passion in the play upon which we have only barely touched, but which permeates it—the passion of fear, even more deeply, of dread.

Because the theme of usurpation is so insistent in Macbeth, parricidal resonances are not hard to find in the play. The real issue is to understand them in the proportions and with the particular inflections that the play itself gives to them. In the most directly voluptuous of her ambitious fantasies, Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth that the "great business" of murdering the king "shall to all our nights and days to come / Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom" (I.v.68, 69-70).

The aspiration to be the only one, to have sole sovereignty, sole masterdom and possession, is the aspect of childhood thinking that has the deepest roots in the psyche and not incidentally the clearest analogue to Augustine's theology of the fall. In a child's imagination the wish to be the one and only is absolute—it is so by definition—and the result is a particularly deep representation of the Augustinian dialectic of more and less. Very young children, in the unlovely exclusiveness of their egoism, always tend to feel that they are impaired by someone else's gain, that in any competition what one wins the other must inevitably lose, that loss is self-diminishment. Such thinking, of course, is not confined to children. Montaigne remarks on its persistence in adults in a brief and unsettling essay entitled "The Profit of One Man is the Dammage of Another." He observes that "let every man sound his owne conscience, hee shall finde, that our inward desires are for the most part nourished and bred in us by the losse and hurt of others," and he associates this condition with the "generali policie" of "Nature": "for Physicians hold, that The birth, increase, and augmentation of every thing, is the alteration and corruption of another"17 Freud contends, in his own domestication of these natural laws, that in a very young boy's fantasies of competition with his father this general policy can take on a murderous inflection; heaving the owner out, to use the words of The Rape of Lucrece, means killing him.

Precisely such an inflection is in fact given to competitive thinking by Duncan at the very outset of Macbeth, when he tells Rosse to "pronounce" the "present death" of the Thane of Cawdor, "And with his former title greet Macbeth . . . What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won" (I.ii.66, 67). The inverse and murderous relationship between winning and losing that Duncan reveals in these lines suggests the dialectic that both Montaigne and Freud comment upon, and it describes the actual condition of the whole world of Macbeth in its early scenes, for the play suggests the anatomy of a parricidal nightmare long before the Macbeths enact one. The witches initiate the absolute opposition between winning and losing at the outset of the play—"When the battle's lost and won" (I.i.4)—and their prophecies are often couched in the language of inverse functions and equivocal contest (being greater or lesser, for example, not so happy or much happier), but the rhetoric of their supernatural solicitations, at least at the start, is quite tangibly anchored in the natural world of the play. Rivalry, "self-comparisons" (I.ii.56), is war, and competition is blood in the fluid world of rebellious Scotland; men often must walk in "strange" if not "borrowed" robes; and a man's title and place can literally be defined by killing. Macbeth does in fact, not in fantasy, defeat and replace the Thane of Cawdor, and though he is responsible for Cawdor's death, he is not responsible for the rebellious disorder that is its occasion. Duncan is the "Lord's anointed" (II.iii.67), and as Macbeth himself painfully testifies, "clear in his great office" (I.vii.18), but if he is a good and rightful king, he is not evidently a strong one, and the darkened realm of ambiguous and bloody contest over which he presides at the start of the play is the political equivalent of the parricidal battleground of a young boy's imagination, a world that invites, in Banquo's
phrase, "the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose" (II.i.8-9).

The diffusion of such thoughts in the early part of the play suggests not that Shakespeare is apportioning them for praise or blame, still less that he is using them to create a subversive subtext, as Harry Berger has recently argued, but rather that he is presenting them as heightened, tragic conditions of the economy of nature that Montaigne discriminates and that Macbeth himself eventually incarnates. The "cursed thoughts" of which Banquo speaks are, of course, in Macbeth's own mind from the very beginning. Freud suggests that a man sometimes will commit murder in order to rationalize his sense of guilt, that guilt is the cause of the crime rather than its result. There is more than a suggestion of this condition in Macbeth (as opposed to Lady Macbeth, in whom guilt is a distinct after-effect). There is a strong sense of forbidden and buried thoughts in Macbeth's rapt reaction to his first meeting with the witches, and these thoughts immediately surface in his first soliloquy when he speaks of the "horrid image" that unseats his heart, of the "horrible imaginings" that surpass his present fears, and of his "thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical" (I.iii.135, 138, 139). But the lines that give the sharpest expression to the parricidal thoughts that both surround him and lie within him occur when Duncan proclaims Malcolm Prince of Cumberland and heir to the throne. Macbeth says in an aside:

The Prince of Cumberland!—That is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires!
Let not light see my black and deep desires.

(I.iv.48-51)

This speech depicts the crucial moment of Macbeth's commitment to the deed, long before Lady Macbeth enters the scene. Macbeth has ostensive reason to envy Malcolm if he is to believe the logic of the witches' prophecy, but that logic is itself an expression of the murderous economy of competition that the rebellion has encouraged in the kingdom. The heart of the speech is its categorical and inverse reasoning: "I must fall down, or else o'erleap" (an image that anticipates Macbeth's subsequent reference to "Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself [I.vii.27]), and this reasoning is in turn the expression of the dark and aspiring desires that both Augustine and Freud find to be at the source of human infirmity and guilt, and that Montaigne, less homiletically, sees as a natural basis of human conduct. As Coleridge suggests, Milton seems to be evoking this moment in the play (and an Augustinian interpretation of it) when he describes how Satan,

fraught
With envy against the Son of God, that day
Honoured by his great Father, and proclaimed
Messiah king anointed, could not bear
Through pride that sight, and thought himself impaired.

(PL, 5.661-65)

Macbeth's own sense of impairment is profound throughout the play, and some of its psychological resonances are so obvious as to be overlooked. The most basic is that the act of parricide (and to some extent the fantasies of it as well) is, like the denial of God, a negation of the source of one's being. As La Primaudaye suggests, it is self-destructive for a man "to seeke his destruction of whom he holdeth his life," and that precise insight is explicitly stated on two occasions in Macbeth, both times in apparent reference to Duncan's sons, but really in reference to Macbeth. The first occurs just after the murder of Duncan, when Donalbain asks, "What is amiss?" and Macbeth himself answers: "You are, and do not know't: / The spring, the head, the fountain of your blood / Is stopp'd; the very source of it is stopp'd" (II.iii.95-97). Macbeth has blood on his
mind as well as his hands, but both the metaphor and the thought have a literal application to the predicament of his own soul. Essentially the same thought, specifically related to ambition as in La Primaudaye, is expressed by Rosse later in the action when the flight of Malcolm and Donalbain appears to implicate them in the murder: "'Gainst nature still: / Thriftless Ambition, that will ravin up / Thine own life's means!" (II.iv.27-29).

An equally profound psychological resonance of Macbeth's impairment, one that reaches even deeper to the roots of his tragedy because it precedes the realm of parricidal contention itself, is both his and our constant sense that his usurpation, his quest—his ambition—is, and by its nature must be, entirely unattainable, a fantasy grotesquely beyond the reach of reality. A very young boy may wish in his imagination to take his father's place, but he obviously cannot do so in fact. He literally cannot perform his father's role, neither sexually nor in other ways, and in this respect such childhood fantasies are like the drunken lust the Porter describes, only far more frightening. Macbeth always knows this. Lady Macbeth, at first, does not. She herself, as we have seen, is most explicit in recognizing the parricidal impetus behind the murder of Duncan, but though that recognition both deters and eventually destroys her, its most immediate effect seems to be to excite her.

Macbeth never experiences such excitement and is at first tenuous and doubtful and later savagely frustrated and enraged, because in him is represented that part of a childhood sensibility that always knows the enterprise to be physically impossible. The play's celebrated clothing images, and their precise development in the course of the action, make this part of Macbeth's predicament unusually clear. Banquo, when speaking of the new honors that have come to Macbeth, refers to "strange garments" that "cleave not to their mould, / But with the aid of use" (I.iii. 146-47), but Banquo looks into the "seeds of time" (I.iii.58) and is willing to wait to let them grow. Macbeth, on the other hand, like a child, cannot wait, and the garments to which he aspires will never fit him: early in the play he calls them "borrow'd robes" (I.iii.109), later they are called the dress of his drunken hopes, and finally they "Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief" (V.ii.21-22). That final description has many reverberations, but its purely physical impact is important.

Macbeth is simply not big enough for the role and title to which he aspires. He is called a dwarf rather than a child because he has in fact had terrifying adult powers, but what the image nonetheless suggests is the radical disproportion between a small child and the grown-up man he wishes all at once to replace and become.

This sense of disproportion, if not disjunction, is central to the whole play. It is not confined to clothing images, and it is represented in ways that suggest even more fundamental sources of human experience. The Porter points to the obvious sexual manifestation of disjunction in discriminating the gap between drunken desire and performance, but his speech is itself only a part of the prevailing concern in the play with the larger and deeper relationship between thought and action. That relationship is Macbeth's own single most constant and important preoccupation, and as I suggested earlier, its roots can be traced to the world of infantile thought. This infantile stage of human development, which Freud calls primary narcissism, is an absolute realization of Macbeth's metaphor of the "single state of man," for to an infant his own body and the world's body seem coextensive, and the microcosm and the macrocosm are experienced as one. External reality for an infant is composed of his own sensations and the projection, often hallucinatory, of his own wishes and fears—of his "thoughts"—and because these thoughts can ignore the coordinates of time and space in what we perceive as external reality, "since what lies furthest apart both in time and space can without difficulty be comprehended in a single act of consciousness," they seem magical and omnipotent. Freud suggests in Totem and Taboo that this infantile narcissism is the source of animism and that it actually characterized primitive man, who practiced magic and peopled the universe with spirits, who "knew what things were like in the world, namely just as he felt himself to be," who "transposed the structural conditions of his own mind into the external world." Freud also argues that such animistic thinking is still present in more civilized and adult experience, in the very nature of dream-work as well as in more conscious life. Its more beneficent or paradisal residues he finds in the state of being in love, when against the normal evidence of external reality, the lovers feel the "I" and "thou" to be one; its more malign and hellish traces he finds in the behavior of
neurotics (and psychotics), in whom the formation of symptoms is determined by "the reality not of experience but of thought," who "live in a world apart," who "are only affected by what is thought with intensity and pictured with emotion."24

A. P. Rossiter writes that in Macbeth Shakespeare represented "the passionate will-to-self-assertion, to unlimited self-hood, and especially the impulsion to force the world (and everything in it) to my pattern, in my time, and with my own hand."25 I think that Rossiter is correct and that behind this "will" and "impulsion," whose force in the play he himself finds somewhat puzzling, is the universal experience of infancy that Freud and others have discriminated. There is certainly no tragedy in Shakespeare's canon in which children figure so importantly and in which, particularly, there is such a profusion of images of infants and infancy. These children and images have many functions, not least as a reminder of Macbeth's own childlessness and of the future in which he cannot participate and tries to destroy, but their profoundest effect,26 I think, is to evoke the whole realm of primitive narcissism in which Macbeth is "cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd" and with which the entire action of the play resonates, a realm in which there is no future except that which is pictured as being fulfilled in the present, in the moment of thought. Lady Macbeth suggests the character of such magical thought and its childhood origins quite precisely when she rebukes Macbeth for his unwillingness to face Duncan's dead body:

The sleeping, and the dead,
Are but as pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil.

(II.ii.52-54)

Though Lady Macbeth correctly locates this "eye" in Macbeth's consciousness, the primitive world of magical and animistic thinking, like the filaments of parricidal competition, pervade the whole play as well. Metaphorical analogies between the macrocosm and microcosm are constant and have unusual power in Macbeth, and as A. C. Bradley and all subsequent critics have recognized, the state of mind within Macbeth and the state of Scotland outside of him seem often indistinguishable. Equally important, nature itself is literally animated in the play—most conspicuously when Birnam Wood indeed moves to Dunsinane—and the play is filled with suggestions of actual magic. There is white magic in the "good" English king, who has "a heavenly gift of prophecy" and whose hand and "healing benediction" can cure "the disease...call'd the Evil" (IV.iii.146ff); and black magic, of course, is represented in the witches. Macbeth does not create the witches, and we see them before he does. They open the play and establish its environment before Macbeth ever appears, and when he himself sees them, so does Banquo; and though Banquo does not, like Macbeth, become obsessed with them, he does nonetheless respond to the magical potency of the realm of thought they represent. Both men wonder (in much the same way that Macbeth will later wonder about his hallucinations) whether the witches are real. Banquo asks, "Are ye fantastical, or that indeed / Which outwardly ye show?" (I.iii.53-54), and Macbeth says that "what seemed corporal, / Melted as breath into the wind" (I.iii.81-82). Though the witches eventually come to seem more exclusively the projection of Macbeth's own mind, they are never only that, and they are always corporeal for us as well as him. Their presence hardly exonerates Macbeth of his crimes, but their powerful effect on stage necessarily draws an audience into the realm of magical and hallucinatory thinking of which they are so palpable an expression.

It is nonetheless within Macbeth's own consciousness that this realm has its most profound and compelling representation in the play. All Shakespearian tragic heroes "live in a world apart," but none so clearly and completely in "the reality not of experience but of thought." The Renaissance phrase "passions of the mind" is peculiarly apposite to Macbeth. His characteristic posture, virtually a physical posture on stage, is self-absorption, in manifold senses of the term. He is at first "rapt" (I.iii.57) but then quickly literally "lost" in his "thoughts" (I.iii.57), not only in soliloquies, in which such preoccupation is conventional, but in the midst of communal occasions, the banquet being the most memorable (and where the apparition that causes his
withdrawal seems more purely the creation of his own mind). Moreover, the thoughts in which he is lost, the "sorriest fancies" he makes his "companions" (III.ii.9), are usually not only about himself, about his state of mind, but about the very pressure of thought in his consciousness, and most specifically about the urgent need to make the thoughts deeds and thereby terminate them—in his own repeated words, to make the hand and heart one. This need, I think, is a recollection of the primitive, infantile fear of disintegration, and it resonates in complex ways in Macbeth's persistent anxiety that parts of his body are becoming separated from each other and in the urgency and dread of his quest to bring them absolutely together in his mind.

Lady Macbeth touches directly upon these issues in her attack on Macbeth's manhood. She says, when he hesitates to kill Duncan,

Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire?

When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And, to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man.

(I.vii.39-41, 49-51)

These lines, which anticipate the Porter's, are resonant with the parricidal motifs of the play, but they also suggest the more primal realm both of Macbeth's fear and of his ambition, for most of his characterization and much of the action of the play are in fact concerned with his efforts to "transpose the structural conditions of his own mind into the external world." This quest takes two forms: altering the perception of reality within his own mind and altering external reality to conform to his thoughts. The quest in either case is pathological, destructive, and ultimately psychotic, and Lady Macbeth shows its eventual outcome in actual life by collapsing and withdrawing entirely into a hallucinatory world of sleepwalking.

The alteration of Macbeth's own consciousness is first suggested in the raptness with which he meditates upon the witches' prophecy, but it is most decisively presented in the soliloquy that describes his hallucination of the bloody dagger. He recognizes that he is seeing "a dagger of the mind, a false creation, / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain," and concludes with clarity that "There's no such thing. / It is the bloody business which informs / Thus to mine eyes" (II.i.38-39, 47-49). The final effect of the soliloquy, however, is to represent Macbeth's dread of disintegration and the consequent need for hallucination in order literally to compose himself, the need for his "eyes" to be "made the fools o'th'other senses / Or else worth all the rest" (II.i.44-45). Freud speaks of the peculiar dread psychotics experience as they recognize that their hold on reality is dissolving. Shakespeare captures that sense of dread in this soliloquy, with the difference, which is part of Macbeth's distinction as a tragic hero, that Macbeth can contemplate psychotic experience without succumbing to it as his wife does.

At the end of the soliloquy Macbeth seems to recover his composure—he seems, again literally, to pull himself together—and those thoughts appear to turn outward:

Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
The very stones prate of my where-about,

And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it.
These lines are difficult but also typical of Macbeth. They suggest not only, as J. Dover Wilson remarks, that Macbeth "speaks as if watching himself in a dream." but specifically that Macbeth wants the outer scene to express the inner one, as it does in dreamwork, that after resisting the impulse to imagine a reality created by and within his own thoughts, he is now preparing to transform the external world to make it conform to those thoughts. The whole of the speech represents Macbeth's utter unwillingness to tolerate any division between what is outside and what is inside himself, and his cold closing lines forecast the ruthlessness and rage with which he will attempt to make the two consonant: "Whiles I threat, he lives: / Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives" (II.i.60-61).

Macbeth's murder of Duncan is his first attempt to bring about such a consonance: in parricidal terms by making himself sole sovereign of his world, the one and only; and on the more primal level of narcissism by making himself and his kingdom coextensive, by literalizing the medieval and Elizabethan metaphor of the king's two bodies. Lady Macbeth, appropriately, plays a major part in the parricidal aspiration, but the conscious pursuit of the more primal quest is Macbeth's alone, and it intensifies after the murder of Duncan, as he successively plans the destruction of Banquo and Fleance and of Macduff's family without Lady Macbeth's knowledge.

In contemplating the first of these family murders, Macbeth says,

> For mine own good,  
> All causes shall give way: I am in blood  
> Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,  
> Returning were as tedious as to go o'er.  
> Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,  
> Which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd.

(III.iv. 134-39)

The distance—in time if not in space—between head and hand is nearly gone when he conceives the murder of Macduff's family. Informed that Macduff has gone to England, he says,

> Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits:  
> The flight purpose never is o'ertook,  
> Unless the deed go with it. From this moment,  
> The very firstlings of my heart shall be  
> The firstlings of my hand. And even now,  
> To crown my thoughts with acts, be it  
> thought and done.

(IV.i. 144-49)

This, it seems to me, is the crown to which Macbeth has aspired all along—to be, in Lady Macbeth's words, "transported . . . beyond / This ignorant present" and "feel . . . The future in the instant" (I.v.56-58), to have the omnipotent power to contain the whole world within his own mind and to make it entirely in his own image—to be, as Augustine says man wished to be at the fall, and as he is in his mind in infancy, like a god. This moment is the apogee of his ambition. It is also the turning point in the action. Unburdened of the gap between the heart and the hand, the thought and the act, the present and the future, he loses the energy of his fear—"Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, / Cannot once start me" (V.v.14-15)—but without the distinction between himself and the outside world, and without the future, he also begins to lose the energy...
and definition of life itself. "Tomorrow" becomes a meaningless prolongation of today (V.v.19), and he becomes "aweary of the sun" (V.v.49). And as he begins to lose life, the outside world begins to regain it. Macbeth's crowning of his thoughts is followed by the slaughter of Lady Macduff and her child, but also immediately afterward by the scene in which Malcolm successfully tests Macduff: Malcolm states that his "thoughts cannot transpose" Macbeth's inner nature (IV.iii.21), but he nonetheless learns to "know" Macduff through an imitation of Macbeth that is also an exorcism of Macbeth's world of transposing thoughts.

Montaigne makes an extremely interesting comment about the nature of such a world of thought in his essay, "Of Judging of Others Death." He remarks that "we make too much account of our selves" and presumptuously believe that the universe has the "same motion" we do: "Forsomuch as our sight being altered, represents unto it selfe things alike; and we imagine, that things faile it, as it doth to them: As they who travell by Sea, to whom mountaines, fields, townes, heaven and earth, seeme to goe the same motion, and keepe the same course, they doe." He associates this way of thinking most particularly with the fear of death:

\[
\text{We entertaine and carry all with us: Whence it followeth, that we deeme our death to be some great matter, and which passeth not so easily, nor without a solmene consultation of the Starres; Tot circa unum caput tumultuantes Deos. So many Gods keeping a stirre about one mans life. . . . No one of us thinkes it sufficient, to be but one.}^{29}
\]

All of Shakespeare's greatest tragic heroes have the infantile presumption Montaigne describes—none of them can be said to think it sufficient to be but one. Macbeth's presumptuous thinking, however, is both more radical than and different from that of other Shakespearean heroes in a way that is profound and instructive. Lear's need, for example, to imagine that heaven and earth move as he does is indeed an infantile denial of his mortal limits, as he himself intermittently realizes—"They told me I was everything;'tis a lie, I am not ague proof (IV.vi.106).^{30} But Lear regresses into infancy because old people naturally do so and because he is afraid of dying. He protests against death, in the last analysis, because he wants to hold on to life and its real human relationships, particularly, at the end, to the love of his child Cordelia. In Macbeth, however, "All is the fear, and nothing is the love" (IV.ii.12), and Macbeth's attempt to make the world keep to his motion is essentially a flight from human relationships and a denial not of death but of life. For his fear of the distance between his thought and the world outside of them is finally a fear of consciousness itself; and his regression to the inordinate self-love of primary narcissism is a return to the "perfect" safety and "perfect" integrity of the womb, which, as Rosse says of Macbeth's kingdom, "cannot / Be called our mother, but our grave" (IV.iii.165-66).

It is common to say that Macbeth's ambition is suicidal. It may be more exact and revealing to recognize that non-being is his ambition, that he commits himself from the first to the suicide that Lady Macbeth acts out at the end, that his deepest wish is to annihilate the very self he asserts. This acute paradox is adumbrated with almost allegorical clarity earlier in Shakespeare's career, in Richard III. In the first part of the play, while he is still climbing, Richard III is untroubled—like the medieval Vice with whom he explicitly allies himself, he is singularly "motivated," joyous in the humor and histrionics of his intrigues, the unalloyed, if destructive, energy of the aspiring will. But once he attains the throne and that energy cannot be directed outwards, it is turned against himself, and he seems immediately deflated. He confesses that "I have not that alacrity of spirit / Nor cheer of mind that I was wont to have" (V.iii.74-75),^{31} and after he awakens from his dream on Bosworth field, he realizes that his love of himself is now destroying him:

\[
\text{What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by; \nl\text{Richard loves Richard, that is, I [am] I. \nIs there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am! \nThen fly. What, from myself? Great reason why, \nLest I revenge? What, myself upon myself? \nAlack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good}
\]
That I have done unto myself?
O no, alas, I rather hate myself
For hateful deeds committed by myself.

I shall despair. There is no creature loves me,
And if I die, no soul will pity me—
And wherefore should they, since that I myself
Find in myself no pity to myself.

(V.iii. 183-91, 201-04)

The sense of astonishment in this soliloquy is perhaps more than Richard's alone. Richard appreciably changes in these lines from a personification into a man, and the speech suggests Shakespeare's own discovery of the dramatic potential of transposing the allegorical topography of the morality drama into the consciousness of a single individual. But in any case the soliloquy precisely discriminates the suicidal paradox of Richard's quest to be, as he says in another context, "myself alone," and it anticipates the tremendous force of that paradox in the tragedy of Macbeth.

The apparent contradiction that Richard sees with such clarity—"What, myself upon myself? / Alack, I love myself"—can be explained in complementary Augustinian and Freudian terms. For Augustine, self-love, the soul's desire to be its own beginner, to be everything, both results in and is born of emptiness, of nothingness. The Freudian analogue, as I suggested earlier, is the self-love of primary narcissism. The resonances of such narcissism exist in all human beings, and in an infant the condition is natural. The regression to such a condition in an adult, however, is truly to confound hell in Elizium, for except in the state of intense love in which the self is paradoxically at once lost and aggrandized, the godlike presumption of primary narcissism results in a sense only of the loss of the self, because a self that encompasses everything ultimately cannot be defined by anything, and is indeed defined by nothing. The premise common to both the Augustinian and the Freudian conception is that human beings must exist in relation to a reality outside of themselves, that, as Wallace Stevens observes, "Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations and interactions."

The Augustinian reverberations of Macbeth's tragedy are explicit and emphatic. Among Macbeth's first words after he has achieved the crown are, "To be thus is nothing" (III.i.47); both he and Lady Macbeth immediately yearn to join the safety and "peace" of the man they have murdered (III.i.6, 20); and the subsequent action progresses inexorably towards the state of mind in which Macbeth himself sees all of life as "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (V.v.26-28) and towards its counterpart in the literal suicide of his wife. What distinguishes Macbeth from Richard III in this respect is not only that Macbeth is partially conscious of the movement toward nothing from the beginning (as Richard is not), but that the whole play, and particularly the relationship of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, dramatizes the emotional character of that movement. A sense of emotional emptiness permeates the play. Lady Macbeth points to it explicitly soon after the killing of Duncan when she speaks of attaining desire "without content" and of spending all and having "nought"; and it informs Macbeth's actions throughout, in the undercurrent of weariness even in his earliest soliloquies, and in the appalling tedium of feeling and spirit that he exhibits in contemplating his later homicides.

Underlying this manifest sense of emotional emptiness, as well as expressing it, is ambivalence, which is almost necessarily born of a suicidal impulsion. The equivocations that flood the language and action of the play are one expression of this ambivalence, and Macbeth, of course, depicts it directly: in his continuous indecision early in the play; in the collocation of aspiration and dread in his consciousness until nearly the end of the play; and even at the end, when he seems beyond fear, in his sleeplessness, a sleeplessness that is at once a denial, to use his own words, of "great Nature's second course, / Chief nourisher in life's feast" and a
protection against "The death of each day's life" (II.ii.38-39, 37).

But the most profound representation of ambivalence is in the actual relationship of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth that occupies the dramatic center of the play, for I think that the two of them do, as Freud observes, suggest disunited parts of a single psychic entity and that the eventual effect of this entity upon us is precisely that of disunion, the kind of radical disunion that in a single individual is understood as self-destructive ambivalence. Lady Macbeth relishes the thought of murdering Duncan, while Macbeth dreads it; later she retreats from thoughts of killing, while he embraces them. He, early in the play, seems without will, while she seems defined by it (though, interestingly, her will can be expressed only through her husband, for whom she has contempt, so that the whole being the two of them compose suggests self-hatred as well as self-love from the start); as the play proceeds, his willpower seems to increase in inverse proportion to the diminution of hers; and by the end of the play their positions are reversed, she becoming "all remorse and he all defiance."  

The cumulative effect of such oppositions and inversions—and many more could be elaborated, since they draw upon all the antinomies of parricide and narcissism in the play—is to suggest not so much change, or even conflict, within the composite soul of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, as stasis and atrophy. For the more the various terms of the oppositions between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are inverted, the more they remain the same. Their antinomy is not resolved but, in many senses of the word, petrified. The result, like the result of profound ambivalence in actual human experience, is not only an increasing sense of paralysis and depletion of energy, but a sense that between the terms of the oppositions, inside the antinomy, is nothing, a void. I mentioned earlier that Shakespeare seemed to have anticipated the marriage of the Macbeths in the Rape of Lucrece, in the dispute within Tarquín between "frozen conscience and hot burning will." In Macbeth that antinomy eventually suggests a human soul that has no temperature at all.

Macbeth's reference to the nourishment that his sleeplessness denies him has a counterpart in the lines of Lady Macbeth that refer to the primal image of life's nourishment, and her speech suggests how elemental is the emptiness that the two of them incarnate:

I have given suck, and know  
How tender'tis to love the babe that milks me:  
I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,  
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn  
As you have done to this.

(I.vii.54-59)

This is the root of the many images in Macbeth of murdered children and of naked, newborn, and bloody babies, and it is, it seems to me, the "rooted sorrow" (V.iii.41), not only of Lady Macbeth but of the whole tragedy. Psychoanalysts trace the deepest forms of despair to the deprivation of maternal nourishment, and there is certainly an insatiable hunger in Macbeth's need for more and more and more. But Macbeth's own past is not an issue in this play, and one hardly needs psychoanalysis to understand that the image, as well as the actuality, of a mother's nurture of an infant at her breast is the irreducible basis of human development—the "rock" upon which the first sense of the self must be "founded," the "casing air" that nourishes the "broad and general" promise of all subsequent relationships (III.iv.21, 22). Macbeth is so bleak and forbidding an experience because it presents a world in which this foundation and promise are violated. For what Lady Macbeth imagines, Macbeth enacts. His attempt, in Augustine's words, to be his own beginner can be understood as a desperate effort to fill the void she describes, but it is also necessarily a movement backwards and downwards towards it; and in that regressive quest, that movement towards nothingness, he denies all the creative processes and relationships that nourish and renew life and give it meaning. Like Night in The Rape of Lucrece and the night that envelops this play, he "Make[s] war against proportion'd course of time" (774). He kills the old and the young, a king and fathers and kinsmen and, at the last, a mother and child. We cannot
know or care how many children Lady Macbeth once had, but we do know that she and Macbeth have none in this play, because the human soul their marriage composes is, like Macbeth's crown, "fruitless" and "barren" (III.i.60, 61).

All of Shakespeare's tragic heroes necessarily move towards death, the formal and, as Northrop Frye insists, defining end of their dramas, but in no other play is that movement so willfully life-denying, and for this reason Macbeth seems the least redemptive and least heroic of Shakespeare's great tragedies. There is a disposition among recent critics of the play also to find it problematic, to stress, for example, the endemic and latently murderous competition within the whole world of the play as well as the absence of feminine values and the ultimate emptiness of all that defines courage and manliness. But this is to treat the play as if it were an argument and to grasp a point and miss it at the same time, for Macbeth is a tragedy of the deliberate emptying out of human life, and as in all the tragedies, and in this one above all, the condition of the hero becomes and is the condition of the world that both Shakespeare and he create in his image. In the tragic world of Macbeth, to be a hero is to enact the human consequences of the predicament of Satan, for whom also, in Milton's words, "the mind is its own place," "not to be changed by place or time" (PL, 1.254, 253). Shakespeare makes us experience the tragic passion of such a "place," because we are made to see so much through Macbeth's eyes, but he also makes us aware of its annihilating cost. For we understand from the outset of Macbeth the conclusion drawn at the end of Richard III: that to love one's self alone is to turn the self upon the self murderously and without pity; that human beings, unlike devils, cannot respire without the changes of Time and Place and the related hierarchies of human generation and nurture; that the ultimate sense of our individual identity, not to mention our humanity, depends upon our willingness to give to and receive from others. We can so deeply experience the hell Macbeth creates and inhabits precisely because the play makes us apprehend these truths, because we always know, as he increasingly does, what is absent, "what is not" (I.iii.142). Our essential experience, like his, is one of loss.

The nature of this loss is represented everywhere in the play, but it is most crystallized in the scenes and speeches that emphasize human relationships and human community. It is shown in the peculiar horror of Macbeth's isolation during the banquet scene—one of the scenes Simon Forman remembered most—and it is stated explicitly by Macbeth when he laments that "that which should accompany old age, / As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have" (V.iii.24-26). And it is asserted, I think, most profoundly in the experience of Macduff. Macduff is not a hero, but he is Macbeth's proper nemesis. His not being "of woman born" (V.viii.13) suggests more about Macbeth's thinking than his own, but it also perhaps frees him from the profound terror of the regressive movement Macbeth has imposed upon the world of the play. Macduff alone in Scotland seems unafraid to know himself and is therefore the one most concerned for others. It is fitting that it is he who announces at the end of the play, in words that resonate with the depths of Macbeth's tragedy, that "the time is free" (V.ix.21). Some critics find that announcement overconfident and contend that the play's ending implicates Macduff in the same ethos of blood as Macbeth's. Macduff admittedly leaves his family unprotected, and he submits, in the midst of his grief over their loss, to Malcolm's call for vengeance. And, not without savagery of his own, he too kills a king. But to argue that he thereby "steps into [Macbeth's] role" and essentially becomes his double is to devalue the play's real equivocations and ironies and to pursue modern shibboleths of contradiction and inversion at the expense not only of what is manifest but also of what deeply moves us. Macduff leaves his family out of duty to his whole society. He does not anticipate, because he cannot imagine, the wantonness of the murder of his wife and children, and the guilt that he himself assumes for their death is one he shares with all mankind (IV.iii.224). And though his role in the play is certainly to kill Macbeth, it is his grief that prompts him, and it is his grief that we remember. If he lets that "grief / Convert to anger" (IV.iii.228-29), as Malcolm urges, he has cause, and we ourselves respond to his anger not as a symptom of emotional impoverishment but, on the contrary, as an expression of the fullness of his sorrow. When Malcolm tells him to "dispute" his grief "like a man," Macduff answers:
I shall do so;
But I must also feel it as a man:
I cannot but remember such things were,
That were most precious to me.

(IV.iii.220-23)

It is no accident that these painfully moving lines should bring into focus what it really means to be a man, and a comparison with Macbeth's atrophied response when he hears of the death of his own wife is inescapable: "She should have died hereafter: / There would have been a time for such a word" (V.v. 17-18).

There is never any doubt in this play how much is lost and what is lost in Macbeth's primitive quest of his "own good." The preciousness of life is lost.

Notes


5 The third part of the "Homily against disobedience and wilfull Rebellion," Certaine Sermons or Homilies appointed to be Read in the Time of Queen Elizabeth I, facsimile of 1623 edition, eds. Mary Ellen Rickey and Thomas B. Stroup (Gainesville, FL: Scholars'Facsimiles & Reprints, 1968), 293, 295, 296.


7 For discussions of parallels between the two works, see especially Bradbrook, "The Sources of Macbeth"; and Muir, Arden Macbeth, 189-90.

8 References to The Rape of Lucrece are to the text in the New Arden edition of The Poems, ed. F. T. Prince (London: Methuen, 1960).


10 Muir focuses upon this speech in his introduction to the Arden edition, xxiii-xxix.


12 A2.

13 [P8].
Q3v.

Freud, 14:321.


"The Early Scenes of *Macbeth*: Preface to a New Interpretation," *ELH* 47 (1980), 1-31. Berger's readings of the opening scenes are fertile and valuable, but I think his consequent "challenge" to the "orthodox view" of the play (4) depends upon a shallow construction of that view to begin with. Northrop Frye's argument about order in *Macbeth* and other Shakespearean tragedies, for example, an argument that Berger does not consider, comprehends immense ironies without deconstructive consequences.


Freud, 13:91.

Freud, 13:86.

*Angel With Horns*, 218.


Muir (Arden edition, xxvii-xxix) calls attention to reiterated images of separation and disjunction in the play. He does not pursue their psychological implications. Interestingly, in *Doctor Faustus*, Marlowe's exploration of necromantic thinking, images of bodily separation are acted out.

Cited by Muir, Arden edition, 50n.

*Essayes*, 548.

References to *King Lear* are to the Arden edition, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1952).


In the following essay, Cunningham examines ways in which modern audiences reconcile Macbeth's double roles as hero and villain.

Actors consider Macbeth to be so unlucky that many of them will never allow it to be named, but refer to it as in the title above ['The Scottish Play']: Peter o'Toole, when playing the leading role, always called it 'Harry Lauder', after a once famous Scottish comedian. No other play of the three dozen Shakespeare wrote has such a reputation for disaster, so it may be worth asking why this should be so. The usual explanation given is that much of the play is performed in gloomy, underlit settings and it ends with some vigorous hand-to-hand fighting, always a likely source of calamity on stage. Yet other plays have underlit episodes and many of his history plays—to which group this, in a way, belongs—involve fighting and 'killing' in their later scenes, when the tired actors may be at risk.

A more likely reason for its unpopularity amongst performers is that it is rarely a successful play in the theatre. Twentieth-century actors seldom become famous for their presentation of Macbeth—if they do it well, people praise them for succeeding despite the difficulty of the role. The crux of the difficulty is nothing to do with lighting or fighting, but the nature of the main character: the hero of Macbeth is also the villain, and it seems almost impossible to reconcile the two roles in a way that will satisfy a modern audience. Other major roles show flawed characters, perhaps—Hamlet with his warped depressive's view of the world, Othello with his hypersensitive jealousy—but none pursues a deliberate course of evil as Macbeth does. Richard III does so, but he is a villain—and we might remind ourselves that, in the eighteenth century for example, a number of great actors were famous for their performances of Richard and of Macbeth. Perhaps an earlier age did not see the paradox, the villain/hero, quite as we do?

The word 'tragedy' like the word 'hero' is capable of several definitions, including the popular one which covers any sort of calamity from a chip pan on fire to a Test cricketer with a sprained wrist via airline crashes and massacres in remote countries. Calamity is, indeed, central to the way we all think of this word. The classical definition of it was given by Aristotle two thousand years before Shakespeare wrote his play. Roughly summarised, Aristotle said that a tragedy must show the sudden downfall of a great man in a position of high prosperity. It should arouse pity and terror in the audience—pity because they should be able to relate to the hero, terror at the power of the gods before which we are so impotent—and should help to cleanse them a little of the arrogance that mankind has always suffered from—the proud assumption that he is the master of his fate; he, in short, is God.

Though this definition may seem austere and academic to a modern student, it is a sound one: a disaster is most impressive when it strikes someone of great stature at the pinnacle of success; it can leave us feeling a little more humble than we were before we saw or read it—can cut us down to size for a while, at least. But this will only work if we can relate ourselves in some way to the hero, and an impossibly virtuous character...
alienates an audience, becomes some kind of Superman. To prevent this, Aristotle suggested that the hero should have some kind of human weakness, and, early in the present century, this 'flaw', as it is usually called, was worked into an elaborate theory of tragedy which was so influential that it still affects most people who study the genre—and it certainly offers a convenient 'explanation' of Macbeth. The human weakness of the hero becomes the tragic flaw—the root of the entire development of the play. So Othello's 'flaw' is jealousy, Hamlet's indecision and so on. Macbeth, of course, suffers from ambition. It is a neat explanation for which Macbeth's own speeches about his ambition seem to provide good evidence, but it is not a lot of use to an actor trying to make sense of a complex role to an audience, and that has always been and always must be the most important criterion in any interpretation of such a play, intended, as it was, only to be acted, not studied.

Modern theatrical directors have not lacked ideas to try to make the play effective. Macbeth, we are told, meets the Witches when he is suffering from 'battle fatigue', the Second World War term for what used (more bluntly) to be called shell-shock. So the military aspect of the man—certainly an important one—is heavily emphasised, and it does not take long to move from this view of the play to our vision of a military society: a Fascist Macbeth is perfectly playable, though surely he is wildly different from any noted Fascist leader of our century? Our horror of military rule is matched by our concern for the deprived, and the Witches can be played as neglected old ladies, desperately poor, whose part therefore becomes a social statement. Such performances strike the viewer more by their ingenuity than by any insight they give into the central puzzle, but a brief glance at these ideas will begin to give us a notion of how very hard it is to interpret any of this play in our times. The death of young Macduff may still disturb (though it is very hard to act it—no small boy can make a convincing job of 'He has killed me, mother') but we, like Macbeth, have 'supped full with horrors' and have read of, seen perhaps in a documentary film, awfulness on such a scale that the casual butchering of a precocious lad seems trivial: we know too well how autocratic powers maintain themselves by systematic reigns of terror and the catalogue of suffering that Ross gives at the end of Act IV fails to shock us. We don't believe in witches. If we revere the monarchy it is in a very different way from what folk felt about it in 1605. Perhaps we don't really believe in evil—few of us, to be sure, believe in hell. To our blasé minds, both heroism and evil seem naive, simplistic: all heroes, we suspect, are looking for their fifteen minutes of fame complete with television interview, all evils are social or 'psychological'. No wonder the Scottish Play gives actors such a hard time.

At least, students may console themselves by recalling that this is about the shortest play Shakespeare wrote—yet producers often feel they must shorten it further. The text is probably short because it was censored politically. Today the director will often cut out the scene where Macbeth sees the show of kings and the passage in IV.3 where Malcolm talks about the King of England curing diseased people who flock to him: these episodes refer specifically to James I (effectively patron of Shakespeare's company), to his ancestry and interest in the divine authority and power of kingship. They make little sense to a modern audience.

Yet even when we try to strip away such 'difficult' passages as this we are left with the central problem more strikingly obvious than ever: there is no hero. Macbeth starts to 'fall' as soon as the play begins; Malcolm makes a late run—he has just one good scene, the one that takes place in England, to build himself up a little in the eyes of the audience—and we are expected to join in the general junketing at the end when the patriotic hero of Act I has somehow become 'a dead butcher'. How is the actor—how are we the readers—to make any coherent sense of this?

We might begin our search for an answer with Aristotle's analysis in mind. It is at once apparent that Macbeth is a great man and that he is at the height of his success in life at the beginning of the play. The injured soldier from the battlefield speaks of his courage in the highest terms and Duncan is full of praise for him as for Banquo (a tactful balance, as Banquo was an ancestor of James I, early in whose reign the play was written). The first stage in his downfall is often said to be when he meets the Witches, who suggest a great future for him. This is to ignore a very important speech. When Banquo and Angus bring him the news that the first prophecy has, in fact, come true—that he is Thane of Cawdor—he shares his thoughts with the audience in a
long aside (I.3.129 onwards). If the vision he has had is good, as it has certainly foretold something good, a well-deserved reward, he asks:

\[
\begin{align*}
\ldots \text{why do I yield to that suggestion} \\
\text{Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,} \\
\text{And make my seated heart knock at my ribs} \\
\text{Against the use of nature?} \ldots \\
\text{My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,} \\
\text{Shakes so my single state of man . . .}
\end{align*}
\] (I.3.133-139)

What suggestion? The Witches made no suggestions at all, but simply addressed him by three titles, the third being 'King hereafter'. They say nothing of murder and Macbeth specifically speaks of 'my thought' as the origin of the fantastical (that is, imagined only) murder. The Witches have merely triggered off a thought that he was already disposed to have, perhaps? Yet in the course of Act I, scene 7 we learn more about his previous thoughts. Lady Macbeth says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nor time nor place} \\
\text{Did then adhere, and yet you would make both}
\end{align*}
\] (I.7.51-52)

—referring to the occasion when Macbeth first spoke to her of 'this enterprise', that is the murder of Duncan. This has to be a reference to plans before the play began, before he had ever seen the Witches. When he does meet them, they merely confirm him in an idea he already had. On this view of him, Macbeth is a total villain, false from the start, and it is possible in performance to represent him so. Yet such an interpretation does not succeed well with audiences. A total villain is not very interesting, and Shakespeare rarely offers us one. In Hamlet, for example, Claudius is saved from being a pantomime wicked uncle by the torments of guilt he suffers, yet guilt is something Macbeth seems hardly to feel at all: at the end of the play he regrets that his age is friendless, that is all, and his wife's death elicits merely the comment that she died at the wrong moment.

Lady Macbeth, indeed, gives us another way of looking at him. Clearly she understands his nature well, and in her first scene (I.5) she gives us a pithy account of her husband. One phrase in particular may strike any listener: ' . . . wouldst not play false,/ And yet wouldst wrongly win'(I.5.19-20). Few of us can face this truth about ourselves. We would all like to have things we should not have, and would accept them if somehow, without quite committing a crime ourselves, we could have the millions in the Swiss bank account that many modern villains probably have and enjoy. Are we to see Macbeth as some kind of universal man, a figure who symbolises our liability to temptation and is actually tempted? This seems rather to diminish him to something less than a hero or a villain: to make him just a fallible mortal who happens to be offered an extraordinary prize, of which he has dreamed.

This scene—surely a key episode in the play—has given rise to a different view, emphasising the role of Lady Macbeth rather than of her husband. She says that she will pour her spirits into his ear, chastise him with the valour of her tongue. Macbeth appears to some interpreters as a man basically good but lured or forced into evil by an unscrupulous wife—in other words, Macbeth is the hero, Lady Macbeth the villain. Productions based on this supposition run grave danger of the hero appearing to be a mere hen-pecked husband, but there is quite a strong case to be made here: in the scene during the banquet given for Duncan (I.7) Macbeth appears as having wholly resolved to go no further with the plot, and giving a very precise account of the reasons for ('vaulting ambition') and against.
The speech (I.7.1-28) deserves and will receive further examination because it shows us a lot about Macbeth, but the important thing to the Lady-as-villain school of thought is that, at the end of his closely argued case for going no further, his wife is able completely to change his mind for him. Yet to see her as his evil genius presents difficulties later on, when it is very clear that she is no party to his misdeeds: 'Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck' he says (III.2.45), having conceived and plotted the murder of Banquo entirely on his own, as he apparently carries out his campaign of terror throughout Scotland later on. The Lady's villainy runs out almost as soon as Duncan has been murdered, where she has had the wit to tell her husband to get suitably dressed but the lack of foresight to think that merely washing off the blood will wash away the guilt. Her subsequent unhappiness, loneliness and suicide make her a fascinating character, and perhaps one of the reasons for the play's ill reputation is that the 'heroine' so much over-shadows the hero—unless he has found a really effective way to play his part.

This brings us to other ways of interpreting him. In a popular edition of the complete works, C J Sisson speaks of 'complex issues in the mind of a poet-warrior', thus succinctly expressing a widely held view of the central character. Macbeth has some fine speeches and they are, of course, poetry because Shakespeare wrote in verse. It is silly to praise Macbeth for his poetry—though critics have done so—when we should be praising the author. Shakespeare wishes us to see how Macbeth thinks and feels, and to see it as vividly as possible, so of course he gives him eloquent, sometimes beautiful, verse. Even so, he is easily misunderstood. To take the most famous example, the 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow of Act V, scene 5 (lines 19-28), we can readily see that it is a passage with perfect cadences to express despair, and with skilfully developed images—'day to day' linking with 'all our yesterdays', 'lighted' with the 'brief candle', and that, possibly, with the 'poor player' since extras were called 'shadows'. But what it actually says, as at least one critic believes, is that Macbeth is off his head: at the time of the play's composition, no sane man believed that the world had no meaning at all. That is to deny God, to deny everything. A nihilist hero is himself nothing, and the play must fail if there is a blank at the heart of it. At best the speech is a statement of total despair, a condition that interests us very briefly because it leads nowhere.

The poetic eloquence of this speech may actually hinder the modern reader from perceiving its meaning: this is not true of two of Macbeth's soliloquies, the one to which we have already referred, in the last scene of Act I, and the famous 'river of blood' image (Act III.4.135-137)—nominally spoken to Lady Macbeth, but really his own thoughts shared with the audience, for by this stage in the play his wife knows almost nothing of what he is up to.

The first speech (I.7.1-28), as we have said earlier, is important both for the light it throws on his divided nature, and thus his role in the play, and for the help it can give the modern reader or viewer in understanding the nature of his action to the full. We are accustomed now to think of famous figures as being at risk—presidents and popes, ministers and judges have been victims of murderous attacks, highly publicised. The murder of one sweet old gentleman may not seem to us a very great matter. In this speech Macbeth with agonised care sums up all the reasons why it would be infamous of him to kill Duncan: the King is his relative as well as his monarch; he is a guest of the castle whom the laws of hospitality protect; he has been a good king—above all lacking in the corruption which power so often brings—'So clear in his great office'. Macbeth, with the ruthless insight into his own nature that is so special to him, says he has only 'vaulting ambition' to urge him on. To us ambition is a virtue, to the Elizabethans it was a sin, for it suggested a kind of impatience against God who had called you to your station in life. Thus the only reason for the murder is a bad one. The reasons against it: it is a crime against kinship; against kingship, itself a triple sin for it is a crime not only against the man who is killed, but against the society which he heads and against God, under whose power the anointed ruler holds sway; against the laws of hospitality; against natural justice which says that Duncan is a good man and therefore should be protected, not destroyed. This analysis, which the original audience would have grasped without elaboration as the concepts were familiar, helps us to realise the enormity of the offence which Macbeth commits: more interestingly it helps us to see into his mind. He is absolutely clear about the nature of the act he contemplates and rejects it. His reason for changing his mind we
shall consider in a moment.

The river of blood image, like the passage we have just considered, helps us in two ways: once again it shows his very clear perception of the nature of his deeds and the position in which he stands; but it also offers an explanation of why he continues on his dreadful course. The whole play may be seen as a working-out of the metaphor. Once you start on a wrong course of action it is almost impossible to go back—indeed, how could Macbeth return? He cannot bring Duncan back to life, or give up his kingdom to Malcolm—who would execute him no doubt—or call Banquo from the grave. He may, in fact, be seen as a man who is the victim of the logic of power-politics: do one ill deed, and you have to do more, until you find you have to tyrannise the whole world and retain your power by terror—including the murder of the children of dissidents. So have dictators always done.

If this is our view of the man—a hero who makes one false step and then cannot retrace it—the reason why he takes that step becomes very important, so we now return to the passage in Act I where he decides to stop before it is too late. The conventional explanation of the change is that his wife, so much stronger than he is we are told, persuades him. His wife is his inferior in reasoning: as soon as the murder is done, Macbeth knows it can never be undone, that the blood will remain on his hands; his wife believes that a little water clears us of this deed. But she has a shrewdness that gives her power. We have seen that, in the episode where she receives her husband's letter, she shows a very good knowledge of the kind of man he is. Thus she knows exactly what taunt will stir Macbeth beyond endurance, and applies it: he cannot bear to be called a coward, so that is what she calls him.

If we are to consider Macbeth as in some sense heroic, we might start with this, for the play begins and ends with it. In the earliest part of the play there is constant reference to Macbeth's great courage on the battlefield. In the last section, though he sees clearly (as usual) how all the odds are against him—the prophecies of his death all fulfilled—he calls upon what he has always had: 'Yet I will try the last,' he says, and engages Macduff with sword and shield. Physical courage never deserts him—his horror at the ghost of Banquo is moral, the spectre of his own guilt appalls him—and in the last Act it is very noticeable indeed how brisk he is, even as premonitions of the end crowd in on him.

Perhaps the way he dies illustrates Shakespeare's own awareness of the problem we have been examining. If Macbeth is a great man, in particular a very brave one, and if we are, late in the play, reminded of this fact rather energetically, our sympathy might go more to him than the conclusion of the play requires. So, it may be argued, he is killed offstage in order that we may not see him bravely fighting against odds which have been loaded by destiny itself. More probably, in my view, he is killed offstage so that his head can be brought on. This is not an easy moment to stage nowadays, for a very good reason: most of us have never seen a severed head. Elizabethan audiences might well have done, for they turned out in enormous crowds to see executions, and the very gruesome ritual of death for high treason was highly popular. At the end of the calculated savagery the executioner cut off and held up the head for all to see. In the earlier part of the business, the disembowelling, the executioner got his hands and arms covered in blood—hence the hangman's hands that Macbeth speaks of immediately after killing Duncan (II.2.27). These images would have had a powerful effect on the audience, which is now lost.

If the final image of Act V is of a traitor justly punished and giving way for true leadership and restoration of a sick country, it is not the image of the whole Act. If we compare what we see in the previous Act, our perplexity increases. The bulk of Act IV is taken up with the extent of Macbeth's evil. In the first scene he is shown threatening omens by the Witches, but these seem only to confirm him in his course. In the second scene we actually see acted out a piece of calculated terrorism, the murder of women and children by jeering, brutal agents. The third, set in England, gives us a long catalogue of the appalling state of Scotland under his rule, where no one is safe; political murder so common, people are not even curious about it; and good men are at highest risk. This is villainy at its most extreme, and conscious villainy at that, deliberate, remorseless.
Yet in much of Act V there seems to be an attempt to re-create the heroic soldier of Act I, even if he fights in a wrong cause, with an additional touch to catch our sympathy. When Macbeth says:

... my way of life
Is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have ...

(V.3.22-26)

we can almost feel sorry for him in his loneliness, an aspect of his life intensified a moment later when the Doctor brings news of his wife—and then tells the audience that he wants to desert as others are doing. Of the courage that still fills Macbeth, aware as he is of his own hopelessness and the reasons for it, we have already spoken. Surely there is something of a hero left?

Perhaps our way through this, whether we act or study the play, is to follow the course, step by step, which leads from the 'valour's minion . . . worthy gentleman' of the second scene to the 'dead butcher' of the end. We do begin with a great man, he is at the height of his achievement, fortune does seem to smile on him, even if he has the capacity to think of evil—we all have, after all. Pride is his undoing—pride in his valour, the pride that lets him think he can succeed against all the odds, can interpret his own destiny as given by the Witches in his own way. His downfall, it may be argued, is in two stages: the first fall is when he changes his mind about killing Duncan, which leads inevitably to other evil and ends in total tyranny; the second is his actual death at the hands of a man he has wronged in the service of a ruler he has usurped. He does indeed become the villain, but he never quite loses our sympathy because, at every stage, he is so painfully aware of what he is doing, and because of the element of 'inevitability' referred to earlier. After a single wrong move carried out in full awareness of its evil, he is in a way no longer the murderer but the victim of that remorseless power of destiny which should, as Aristotle said, arouse our pity and our terror.

**Macbeth (Vol. 44): Religious And Theological Issues**

**Howard Felperin (essay date 1975)**


[In the following essay, originally presented in 1975, Felperin discerns a parodic gap between the Christian view of the world set forth in the medieval mystery plays and Shakespeare's adaptation of that view in *Macbeth*. On one hand, the critic argues, the play demystifies sacred myths and symbols by representing them as arbitrary constructs, while on the other it demonstrates that they serve an indispensable function in society.]

'Tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil.

—*Macbeth*, II.ii.53-54

The last of Shakespeare's major tragedies to depend primarily on a native tradition of religious drama is also the most widely and seriously misunderstood in its relation to it. Indeed, *Macbeth* might well appear to be an exception to the principle of Shakespearean revision we have deduced from the earlier tragedies. In those plays,
the effect of mimetic naturalization over and above the older models contained within them had been achieved precisely by revealing the moral oversimplification of those models, in sum, by problematizing them. But Macbeth is unique among the major tragedies in having generated nothing like the central and recurrent problems that have shaped interpretation of Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and even Antony and Cleopatra. Certain aspects of the play have of course received more than their share of attention and are continuing matters of debate: the status of its witches and of witchcraft; its topical relation to James I; the authorship of the Hecate scenes, yet these are more pre-critical problems of background and provenance than critical problems as such. For Macbeth, as Shakespeare's one "tragedy of damnation," is so widely acknowledged to exist within a relatively familiar dramatic tradition, that critical response to the play has become almost a matter of reflex in assimilating the play to it. This would seem to contradict the argument so far advanced that Shakespearean tragedy is fundamentally and finally unassimilable to its models, and that this unassimilability is what underlies and generates their problematic status and realistic effect in the first place. At the risk of bringing chaos into order by discovering problems where none have existed, I want now to reexamine the relation between Macbeth and its inscribed models in the light of the previous discussion. It may turn out that those models are not quite the ones usually said to lie behind the play, and its relation to them not the clear and settled congruity that it is generally thought to be.

The tradition within which Macbeth is almost universally interpreted is that of orthodox Christian tragedy, the characteristic features of which are already well developed as early as Bocaccio and Lydgate and are familiar to all students of medieval and renaissance literature. It typically presents the fall of a man who may be basically or originally good but is always corruptible through the temptations of the world and his own pride or ambition. This action occurs against the structure of a fundamentally ordered and benevolent universe, which is finally self-restorative despite the evil and chaos temporarily unleashed within it, since crime will out and sin is always repaid. Of course the point in this essentially didactic genre is to illustrate the wages of human wrong-doing and the inexorability of divine purpose. That Macbeth, with its malign forces of temptation embodied in the witches, its vacillating but increasingly callous protagonist, and its restorative movement in the figures of Malcolm and Macduff, has affinities with this tradition is obvious and undeniable. The moral pattern of Shakespeare's play is not essentially different from that set forth in Boccaccio and Lydgate, and there is no lack of more immediate versions of it with which Shakespeare would have been well acquainted. He had drawn on A Mirror for Magistrates in previous histories and tragedies; several sixteenth-century moralities deal with the same theme; and the same pattern, though without political overtones, informs Dr. Faustus, a play with which Macbeth is often compared. Shakespeare's own early Marlovian monodrama, Richard III, falls squarely within this tradition of Christian tragedy, and its similarities with Macbeth were pointed out as far back as the eighteenth century.

Yet there is another dramatic tradition at work within Macbeth or, more accurately, a sub-genre of this same tradition, that is at once much older than these examples and more immediately and concretely present within the play. For here, as in Hamlet, Shakespeare allows the primary model for his own action to remain at least partly in view. We have already seen how the cry of the elder Hamlet's ghost to "remember me" is more than a reminder to his son to avenge his death; it simultaneously conjures up the older mode of being and acting which would make revenge possible, which the action of Hamlet at once repeats and supersedes, and which points with all the intentionality and ambiguity of any sign toward the heart of the play's meaning. In Macbeth, too, the persistence of an older dramatic mode within the world of Shakespeare's play is no less explicitly recalled. Though there are many places in Macbeth that could serve as an entry into this older world, the two modern scholars who have consciously perceived its existence have both entered it through, so to speak, its front door, the "Hell-gate" of Inverness with its attendant "devil-porter." For here too the purpose of the porter's request, "I pray you remember the porter" (II.iii.22), is more than to extract a tip from Macduff whom he has just admitted. The reference of his remark is ambiguous, as Glynne Wickham observes, "for it can be addressed by the actor both to Macduff and to the audience. As in the porter's dream, it is in two worlds at once; that of Macbeth's castle and that of another scene from another play which has just been recalled for the audience and which the author wants them to remember."
That other play, which Wickham advances as Shakespeare's "model for the particular form in which the chose to cast Act II, scene iii, of Macbeth, and possibly for the play as a whole," 2 is The Harrowing of Hell in the medieval English mystery cycles. Derived from the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus and adapted in two of the oldest rituals of the Roman Catholic liturgy, it is enacted in all of the extant cycles, though details of staging and dialogue differ from one to another. Between his crucifixion and resurrection, Christ comes to hell (represented as a castle on the medieval stage) and demands of Lucifer the release of the souls of the prophets and patriarchs. In all versions, the arrival of Christ is heralded by strange noises in the air and thunderous knocking at the castle gates. In the York and Towneley plays, the gate of hell has a porter appropriately named Rybald, a comic devil who breaks the news to Beelzebub of Christ's arrival and questions David and Christ himself as to his identity. Finally, Jesus breaks down the gate of hell, routs the resisting devils and, after a debate with Satan, who tries to deny the prophecies of his godhead, releases the prophets amid prayers and rejoicing. The Coventry version of the playlet, the one that Shakespeare is almost certain to have seen, is not extant, but there is no reason to think it was substantially different from the other versions. In fact, the Pardoner in John Heywood's The Foure PP (1529?), is described as having been on easy terms with "the devyll that kept the gate," since he had "oft in the play of Corpus Christi . . . played the devyll at Coventry," and is himself addressed as "Good mayster porter." 3 With its castle setting, bumbling porter named Rybald, "Clamor vel sonitus materialis magnus" 4 in the depth of night, and background of prophecy, the cyclic play of the Harrowing of Hell would have been easily evoked by the business of Macbeth, II,iii in the minds of many in Shakespeare's audience who still remembered the porter. Moreover, the memory of the old play would strongly foreshadow the outcome of Macbeth as well, since Christ's entry into and deliverance of the castle of hell also looks forward to Macduff's second entry into Macbeth's castle and triumph over the demonic Macbeth at the end of the play.

Though prefiguring the didactic superplot or counterplot of Macduff's liberation of Scotland and defeat of Macbeth, however, The Harrowing of Hell has little direct bearing on the main or central action of Macbeth's personal destiny within the play, aside from rather broadly associating him with Beelzebub or Satan. But there is another play, or rather pair of plays, in the mystery cycles that supply what The Harrowing of Hell leaves out in the action of Macbeth, namely The Visit of the Magi and The Massacre of the Innocents. The cycles are more varied in their dramatization of these episodes from St. Matthew than they are in the case of the deliverance from hell, particularly as to the outcome of the massacre, but all share certain elements that bear directly on Macbeth's career. In all of them, three wise men come to pay homage to a king born in Israel and descended from David, the prophecies of whose birth they rehearse to Herod. Outraged at these prophecies of a king not descended from him, which are confirmed by his own Biblical interpreters, Herod plans to murder the magi and all the children of Israel. The magi escape, warned by an angel, whereupon Herod sends his soldiers out to exterminate his rival, who also escapes into Egypt. The outcome of Herod's brutality—the murders are carried out on stage amid the pleas and lamentation of the mothers—though different in each version, is in all cases heavy with dramatic irony. The Towneley play, for example, concludes with a self-deluded Herod proclaiming that "Now in pease may I stand / I thank the Mahowne!" 5 In the York and Coventry versions, the irony is more explicit, as the soldiers of the former admit under questioning that they are not sure whether Jesus was among the "brats" they have murdered, and in the latter a Messenger informs Herod that "All thy dedis ys cum to noght; / This chyld ys gone in-to Eygipte to dwell." 6 In the Chester play, Herod's own son is murdered by his soldiers while in the care of one of the women. When told the news, Herod dies in a paroxysm of rage and is carried off to hell by devils. Even more pointed and ironic is the Ludus Coventriae version, in which Herod stages a feast to celebrate the successful execution of his plan to consolidate his reign and succession. Its mirth and minstrelsy are interrupted with the stage-direction, "Hic dum [the minstrels] buccinant mors interficiat herodem et duos milites subito et diabolus recipiat eos." While the devil drags Herod away, the spectral figure of Death, "nakyd and pore of array" closes the play with the inevitable moral: "I come sodeynly with-in a stownde / me with-stande may no castle / my jurnay wyl I spede." 7
The appearance of death at Herod's feast cannot help but recall the appearance of Banquo's ghost at Macbeth's feast. For even though this motif of death at the feast of life occurs only in this one version of the Herod plays, it is a medieval topos which must have been available to Shakespeare from other dramatic or pictorial sources, if not from this particular play, since he had already employed it in Fortinbras' image at the end of *Hamlet*:

> O proud Death,  
> What feats is toward in thine eternal cell,  
> That thou so many princes at a shot  
> So bloodily hast struck?

(V.ii.353-356)

Indeed, the influence of the medieval cycles on *Macbeth* is not confined to the pair of plays already discussed but can be traced to other plays within the same cycles. Shakespeare's choric trio of witches, for example, are anticipated not only by the three kings in *The Adoration of the Magi*, but by the three shepherds and the three prophets in the play that precedes it in the Coventry and other cycles, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*. There, both the shepherds and the prophets are granted foreknowledge of Christ's birth, both discuss his prophesied kingship, and in the Chester version, both employ a form of paradoxical salutation similar to that of Shakespeare's witches:

*Primus Pastor.* Haile, King of heaven so hy,  
born in a Cribbe . . . !  
*Secundus Pastor.* Haile the, Emperour of hell,  
and of heaven als . . . !  
*Tertius Pastor.* Haile, pyncs withouthen  
peere, that mankind shall relieue . . . !

Moreover, prophecies of the birth of a potentially subversive child trouble not only Herod, but both Pharaoh and Caesar Augustus before him in the Towneley cycle. Both follow the same, self-defeating course of attempting to defy the prophecies through promiscuous slaughter. Certain details of the Towneley play of Pharaoh may even find their way, from this or other versions of the story, into some of Macbeth's most famous language and imagery. His miraculous lines on how "this my hand / Will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red" (II.ii.60-62) may well have their humble beginning in the reported outcome of Pharaoh's equivocations with Moses, the first of Egypt's plagues:

>Syr, the Waters that were ordand  
for men and bestis foyde,  
Throug outt all egypt land,  
ar turnyd into reede-bloyde.

Or Macbeth's anguished outcry, "O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!" (III.i.36) may echo the same soldier's account of the third plague while internalizing it: "Greatte mystis [of gnats], sir, there is both morn and noyn, / byte us full bytterly." Even the plague of darkness may contain the hint for the dominant imagery of Shakespeare's play. It is not my intention to press these parallels as literal "sources," but it is important to recognize the close affinities of *Macbeth* with a series of Biblical tyrant plays, all repeating essentially the same story, each of whose protagonists—Satan, Pharaoh, Caesar, Herod—is a type of tyranny within a providential scheme of history. The apparently innocent request to "remember the porter" opens up
an historical context for Macbeth that we have only begun to explore.

What, then, is the significance of these largely neglected models as they are deliberately recalled within Shakespeare's play? Glynne Wickham sums up their contribution to Macbeth as follows:

The essentials that he drew from the play [of Herod] are the poisoning of a tyrant's peace of mind by the prophecy of a rival destined to eclipse him, the attempt to forestall that prophecy by the hiring of assassins to murder all potential rivals and the final overthrow and damnation of the tyrant. . . . Like Herod with the Magi, Macbeth adopts a twofold plan. He aims first at Banquo and Fleance; and, when this plan miscarries, he extends his net to cover all potential rivals and strikes down Lady Macduff and her children. The last twenty lines of this scene are imbued with the sharpest possible verbal, visual and emotional echoes of the horrific scene in Bethlehem. Young Seward's image of Macbeth as both tyrant and devil in Act V, scene vii, recalls the drunken devil-porter of Act II, scene iii, and thereby the two complementary images of the religious stage, Herod the tyrant and the Harrowing of Hell, are linked to one another in compressed form to provide the thematic sub-text of this Scottish tragedy. Pride and ambition breed tyranny: tyranny breeds violence, a child born of fear and power: but tyrants are by their very nature Lucifer's children and not God's, and as such they are damned. As Christ harrowed Hell and released Adam from Satan's dominion, so afflicted subjects of mortal tyranny will find a champion who will release them from fear and bondage. This Macduff does for Scotland."

The passage is worth quoting at such length because it so accurately reflects not only the indisputable elements Shakespeare takes over in Macbeth from the medieval tyrant plays but the doctrinal message those plays were designed to illustrate and inculcate, a moral orientation that critics much less conscious of dramatic traditions and much more "modern" and secular in outlook than Wickham also find in Macbeth. But to assimilate the meaning of Macbeth to that of its medieval models, as Wickham and most other critics of the play more or less explicitly do, is not only to make Shakespeare's play less interesting than it is but to make it say something it does not say. Such an interpretive stance is based on a misunderstanding of the way any truly great writer uses his sources and models, as well as the way Shakespeare used his own in this play.

For the resemblances of plot structure, characterization, even language between Macbeth and the medieval cycle plays cannot simply be ascribed to a pious attitude and a parallel intent on Shakespeare's part in relation to his models. All these resemblances arise in the first place as a result of the efforts of characters within, the work to turn the action in which they are involved toward or even into a certain kind of older action, to recreate their experience in the image of certain precedents for their own purposes, purposes which cannot be immediately identified with the author's and which the play as a whole may not ratify. We have already seen this impulse at play within Hamlet and the previous tragedies, where Hamlet, Othello, and Lear all attempt and fail to turn the action into a version of the morality play, and it is no less present and pervasive in Macbeth, though here the particular medieval convention involved is a somewhat different one. For from the inception of the Scottish counterplot, Malcolm, Macduff, and the others are given to recreating present history in terms of medieval dramatic conventions. In Malcolm's depiction of him during the interlude at the English court, for example, Edward the Confessor is presented not as an historical monarch but as a type of royal saintliness, the dispenser of "The healing benediction" and possessor of "a heavenly gift of prophecy" (IV.iii. 156-158). In contrast to the England blessed with such a king, Scotland has become, in Ross's account, a place "Where sighs and groans, and shrieks that rent the air, / Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems / A modern ecstasy" (IV.iii. 168-170), that is, a hell on earth that cries out for the harrowing. Its ruler becomes, in Macduff's words, "Devilish Macbeth," "this fiend of Scotland" than whom "Not in the legions / Of horrid hell can come a devil more damned" (IV.iii.55-56). In the same highly stylized and archaic vein, Malcolm proceeds to characterize himself, first as a walking abstract and brief chronicle of vices exceeding even those of the collective portrait of Macbeth, and then as an equally abstract model of virtue allied to Edward the
Confessor. To seek some naturalistic basis for his highly abstract "testing" of Macduff is futile, for like Hamlet's "portrait-test," its rhetorical and theatrical overdetermination will always be in excess of any personal motive that can be offered in so far as it is inspired by old plays rather than present feeling. Malcolm, like Hamlet, must go out of his way to abstract and depersonalize himself and his world as a necessary prelude to the scenario of redress being contemplated. He and his fellows must remake Scottish history into moral allegory, thereby legitimating themselves and their historical cause by assimilating them to an absolute and timeless struggle of good against evil. Malcolm and his party must, in sum, represent themselves and their world, in precisely the terms of the play's medieval models, that is, in the name of all that is holy.

This effort to abstract themselves to older and purer roles, however, is not the exclusive prerogative of the angelic party of Malcolm and his followers and not confined to the Scottish superplot. A complementary but antithetical project is already underway near the beginning of the play in Lady Macbeth's attempt to become one with a demonic role:

> Come, you spirits  
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
> And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull  
> Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood;  
> Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,  
> That no compunctious visitings of nature  
> Shake my fell purpose. . . .

(I.V.38-44)

Her terrible soliloquy is appropriately cast in the language of the tiring room, as if its speaker were an actress beckoning attendants to costume her and make her up for the part she is about to perform, to "unsex" and depersonalize her into yet a fourth weird sister, even to dehumanize her into the "fiend-like" creature that Malcolm styles her at the end. All her efforts are bent toward making herself into a creature who trades lightly, even whimsically, in evil, and if her soliloquy echoes something of the incantatory tone of the witches'speeches, her utterances surrounding the murder reproduce something of their levity:

> Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead  
> Are but as pictures. 'Tis the eye of childhood  
> That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed,  
> I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal,  
> For it must seem their guilt.

(II.ii.52-56)

Her entire effort of depersonalization lies compressed within the notorious pun: an inner condition of being ("guilt") is to be externalized into sheer theatrical appearance ("gilt"), not simply to transfer it onto others but to empty it of the substance of reality and make it (stage-)manageable. Her repeated assurance that "A little water clears us of this deed" (II.ii.66) would similarly transmute the red and real blood of Duncan not simply into gilt but into something as superficial and removable as the Elizabethan equivalent of ketchup or greasepaint: "How easy is it then!" There is bad faith here of course, in so far as her transformation never loses consciousness of its own theatricality and thus never becomes complete. She would qualify herself for murder by becoming a devil, but to her devils remain only "painted," thereby disqualifying herself for murder. Lady Macbeth's attempt to theatricalize herself into a callous instrument of darkness and thereby disburden herself of the horror of the time is doomed to break down, largely because it receives no external confirmation or reinforcement from her husband—since role-playing in drama as in culture does not go on in a vacuum—who is constitutionally unable to think of these deeds after these ways.
In contrast to her fragile and ambivalent commitment to a mode of imitation which is expedient, temporary, and only skin-deep, Macbeth's commitment is to a mode of vision in which sign and meaning coincide, role and self are indivisible, and an action is not imitated but accomplished, once and for all time. It is a way of thinking and seeing much closer to that of Macduff, who describes the scene of the murder as "the great doom's image" (II.iii.74), than to that of his wife:

This Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye
That tears shall drown the wind.

(I.vii.16-25)

In Macbeth's apocalyptic and allegorical projection of the deed and its consequences, Duncan becomes the Christ-like victim, and Macbeth the Judas-like traitor and Herod-like judge who will himself be judged. With its winds, weeping, pleading, and trumpet-tongued angels, the imagined scene conflates features of several typologically related cycle plays, notably those of the Crucifixion and Last Judgment. Within a mode of vision that blurs distinctions between intent and action, subject and object, illusion and reality, even to contemplate such a deed is to shake and crack the "single state of man" in which role and self were formerly united in the figure of Duncan's trusted defender. "To know my deed," he tells his wife after the murder, "twere best not know myself (II.ii.72), and for Macbeth the rest of the play is dedicated to assimilating himself to the role he has fully foressen to replace his old one, to closing any gap that remains between himself and it:

From this moment
The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:
The castle of Macduff I will surprise,

Seize upon Fife, give to th'edge o' th'sword
His wife, his babes. . . .
No boasting like a fool;
This deed I'll do before this purpose cool.

(IV.i.146-154)

A new and antithetical unity of being is born. Macbeth expounds and enacts a philosophy of language in relation to action that brings him into line with every previous tyrant of the medieval and Tudor stage. Tamburlaine's insistence on the instantaneous convertibility of his words into deeds is notorious, but the same attitude underlies Cambyses's murderous demonstrations of his omnipotence, as well as the decrees of Pharaoh, Herod, and Caesar that all the children shall be slain and all the world taxed. In each case, the tyrant enacts a demonic parody of the divine power he claims, namely the power to make the word flesh. By the end of his play, Macbeth's assimilation of himself to the dictates of the tyrant's role within the older drama being mounted by Malcolm and Macduff would seem to be complete, their dramatic visions having joined into one.
Given that the Macbeths willingly take on and play out the roles of "butcher" and "fiend-like queen" assigned to them in the apocalyptic history of Scotland according to Malcolm and Macduff, how can we contend that they are anything more than the walking moral emblems that the latter say they are, or that their play is anything essentially different from its medieval models? The answer is already implicit in the nature of their role-playing. For the fact is that, despite the different attitudes they bring to their role-playing and the different outcomes of it, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth both have to strain very hard to play out their respective roles, and neither is completely successful in doing so. Lady Macbeth cannot fully become the fiend she tries to be, and Macbeth cannot fully become the strutting and fretting Herod he thinks he is. In the case of Lady Macbeth, her eventual madness is the index of the very humanity she would negate by turning herself into a pure and untrammeled role, the residue of an untransmuted humanity that had sought boldness in drink and was checked by remembered filial ties before performing the act that should have been second nature. Madness in Shakespeare's tragedies always attests to the incompleteness of an unreinforced role-playing, that technique by which the self in its naked frailty seeks refuge from the anxiety of such extreme and disruptive actions as revenge, regicide, or abdication through the adoption of an older and simpler mode of being. In this respect, the "antic disposition" of Hamlet, the madness of Lear on the heath, and now the quiet somnambulism of Lady Macbeth are very different from the behavior of Herod, who "ragis in the pagond and in the street also" when he fails to find confirmation of his absolute kingship in the prophecies, the wise men, and events themselves. For Herod does not and cannot go mad; he is mad. His "rage" is his role, and no matter how often he is traumatized, he will rebound with cartoon-like resiliency to his former outline, and rage again.

To define the truer madness that occurs in Shakespeare's tragedies, however: what is it but to be something other than role? Those who would follow Malcolm, Macduff, and the rest in equating Lady Macbeth with her fiend-like role and Macbeth with his role of butchering tyrant, and proceed to moralize or patronize them accordingly, are simply not listening:

Macduff. Turn, hellhound, turn!  
Macbeth. Of all men else I have avoided thee,  
But get thee back! My soul is too much charged  
With blood of thine already.

(V.vii.3-6)

Macduff's challenge proceeds programmatically out of his own role of missionary, Christ-like avenger. Yet Macbeth's response proceeds not out of his assigned and chosen role of stage-tyrant, but out of an unsuspected reserve of sympathetic and spontaneous humanity that exists beneath it, a self still fragile and unhardened in evil even at this point, against his own and Macduff's protestations and accusations to the contrary. And Shakespeare's juxtaposition of the two reveals how inadequate and inappropriate are the moral terms deriving from the didactic drama of Satan, Pharaoh, Herod, Cambyses, even Richard III, to the drama of Macbeth.

Shakespeare makes it clear that Macbeth's play is in a fundamental sense not their play, despite the efforts of the characters within it, including Macbeth, to conform it to an orthodox tyrant play, and the many resemblances that result. Consider, for example, the nature of the prophecies and the manner in which they are accomplished. Just as Herod had questioned the Magi (and in one version his own interpreters), Macbeth questions the witches. He is shown in a highly archaic dumb-show an emblem of a "Child Crowned, with a tree in his hand" and another of a "Bloody Child," with accompanying glosses to the effect that "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" and "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him" (IV.i.80-81, 92-94). Malcolm's camouflaging of his troops with the foliage of Birnam Wood identifies him with the crowned child bearing a branch, Macduff's Caesarean birth identifies him with the bloody child, and together they do indeed overcome Macbeth, with all the irony of a violated nature having her vengeance on the man who has violated her workings in himself. Yet even as these prophecies come true, they do so with an air of contrivance and artificiality quite alien to the
inevitability of those of the cycle plays. On the religious stage the prophecies had had a literal transparency that those of *Macbeth* no longer possess. No interpretive effort is necessary to reconcile what was predicted (a king is to be born who will supplant Herod) and what occurred; or the literal meaning of the prophecy (Christ will supplant Herod) and its moral meaning (good will supplant evil); or the signs in which the prophecy is expressed (a star in the sky like a "sun"; a word in a sacred text) and their significance (the "son" of God, the "word made flesh").

In *Macbeth*, by contrast, a strenuous interpretive effort is necessary to reconcile the portentous emblems and pronouncements of the witches'dumb-show with their human and natural fulfillments, though we are largely unconscious of that effort when we make it. This is not simply a matter of the trickiness traditionally associated with prophecies of demonic origin. For not only are the prophecies of *Macbeth* not transparent and univocal as the prophecies of the Herod plays had been; strictly speaking, they do not even come true. It is not Birnam Wood but Malcolm's army bearing branches from Birnam Wood that comes against Macbeth at Dunsinane. Macduff may have been "Untimely ripped" from his mother's womb, making him something of a man apart, but that hardly qualifies him as one not "of woman born," the immaculate and otherworldly avenger of a fallen Scotland. It is only when we suppress their literal meaning (and our own literalism) and take the prophecies solely at a figurative level that they can be said to "come true" at all, let alone be made to illustrate the kind of moral logic we like to read out of them. In his handling of the prophecies so as to reveal their "double sense," their disjuncture of literal and figurative meanings, Shakespeare has introduced an element of parody, of fallen repetition, into his play in relation to its medieval models.

Yet this parodic discrepancy between Christian vision and Shakespearean revision which runs through the play does not in the least prevent the Scottish resurgents from blithely conducting themselves and their counterplot as if no such gap existed and the two were one and the same, even though their own elected roles and exalted design are compromised by it. We might think, for example, that Macduff's unexplained abandonment of his own children and wife to Macbeth's tyranny, though ultimately providing him with the most natural of motives for revenge, could scarcely strengthen his claim to the exalted, impersonal role of Scotland's avenger prescribed by the play's Christian model. After all, even on the medieval stage it is the epic, superhuman Christ of the Apocalypse who harrows hell, and not the more human figure of the gospels. But for the Scottish resurgents, these deeds must not be thought of after these ways. It is precisely their capacity to sublimate their naked frailties into the service of a missionary role and a divine plan that constitutes their real strength and the prerequisite for their success.

Macduff's personal guilt and grief are instantly transformed, at Malcolm's prompting, into the "whetstone" of his sword in the impending divine conflict, for which "the pow'rs above / Put on their instruments" (IV.iii.238-249). As such an "instrument" of righteousness, Macduff "wants the natural touch" (IV.ii.9) in more ways than his wife imagines. His unhesitating absorption into his role is never more astonishing than when he finally presents his own nativity legend, however literally lacking it may be, as the necessary credential for defeating Macbeth, however invincible in combat he once again appears. The same absence of self-doubt or self-consciousness in his new kingly role also characterizes Malcolm (whose single act prior to the mounting of the counterplot was also one of flight), particularly in his disposition of that "Which would be planted newly with the time" (V.viii.65) after the final victory. His announced intent of rewarding his followers with promotion to the rank of earl and of punishing his foes ("The cruel ministers / Of this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen" [V.viii.68-69]) sets the seal on the new historical order of his reign as a secular imitation of divine judgment. Yet the scene is also an eerie and unsettling repetition of an earlier scene in the play. For Malcolm's language and gestures cannot help but recall those of Duncan after the victory over Cawdor and Macdonwald, a new era of freedom and love that proved only too fragile and temporary, anything but an apocalyptic triumph of good over evil. The battle toward a civilized and humane order, like all the play's battles would seem only to have been lost and won after all. The arrival of Malcolm and Macduff at Dunsinane is decidedly not the harrowing of hell or the coming of Christ, though its partisans behave as if it were.
Of course it is not really surprising that Macduff and Malcolm never come to perceive, much less feel, themselves to inhabit the gap between the heroic and archaic roles they adopt and the precarious selves that adopt them. For they are ultimately akin to such earlier Shakespearean tragic foils as Laertes and Edgar, un-self-conscious and un-self-questioning imitators of an inherited and wholly conventional way of acting, two-dimensional characters in a three-dimensional world. It makes no difference whether we say that such foils seem cardboard or cut-to-pattern because they are supporting actors or that they are doomed to be supporting actors because they are cardboard and cut-topattern. For it is precisely the conventionality of Laertes's rant and Edgar's mock-madness that throws into relief the dimensionality of Hamlet's and Lear's more demanding experience. We can accept in them an unreflectiveness, even an insensitivity that is harder to accept or understand in Shakespeare's protagonists themselves. We are not unsettled when Laertes acts like Laertes, rants for revenge and leaps into his sister's grave. The cat will mew, the dog will have his day. It is much more unsettling, however, when Hamlet acts like Laertes, betrays the very depth and sensitivity that distinguishes him from Laertes, and does the same. Similarly, no one is shocked when Macduff enters with "the tyrant's cursed head" atop a pike and apocalyptically proclaims that "The time is free" (V.viii.55), nor when Malcolm lends his blessing to the deed and the sentiment. For that judicial brutality and the ritual language that surrounds it proceed directly out of the ingenuous repetition of convention that we have come to expect from these characters and violate nothing that has been shown to exist in either of them. Macbeth's brutalities, by contrast, and the self-brutalization that makes them possible are profoundly disturbing to us, not simply because they remain so disturbing to him, and not simply because they represent, as one critic puts it, "murder by thesis" —for what else is Macduff's decapitation of Macbeth?—but because they betray precisely that fullness of humanity with which Shakespeare has endowed him in contrast to his foils. In his strenuous effort to become the complete tyrant, to achieve the demonic equivalent of his angelic foils'unself-conscious conventionality, Macbeth must go out of his way to ignore the gap he senses between the pious and preordained view of things and the way things are, must do willfully what the others do quite naturally.

The question arises, then, why does Macbeth accept his destiny as a latter-day Herod, when he is not Herod? For no less remarkable than Macduff's unhesitating conviction that his birth carries the necessary credential for defeating him, is Macbeth's unresisting acceptance of it and the consequent slackening of his "better part of man." Why does Macbeth acquiesce to prophecies that require his co-operation to be fulfilled? The answer to these questions, I would suggest, lies in the mode of vision that we have already seen him bring to his experience before the murder of Duncan. He simply cannot do otherwise, not because his actions are compelled from without—the prophecies are not theologically binding like those of the cycle plays but psychologically self-fulfilling—but because he has long since internalized his society's way of seeing and thinking. Both before and after the murder, Macbeth's is a primitive and animistic world of portents and totems, of stones that "prate" of his whereabouts, of a bell that summons to heaven or hell, of knocking that might raise the dead, of the crow turned emblem of darkness, of night that is synonymous with evil, of accusing voices and menacing visions, a world become archaic melodrama burdened with significance. This "overperception," in which distinctions between subject and object, man and nature, illusion and reality, past and present—all the potential distinctions of our modern critical and historical consciousness—are lost, is characterized in its essence by Lady Macbeth, when she reminds her husband that "'Tis the eye of childhood / That fears a painted devil," that "these flaws and starts . . . would well become / A woman's story at a winter's fire, / Authorized by her grandam" (III.iv.63-66). Yet it is just such a childlike and superstitious vision that finally binds everyone else in the play, including Macbeth, into a society as traditional and cohesive as a tribe or a clan. It is the vocation of the ruling and priestly class of such a society to paint, fear, and punish the devils who endanger that cohesiveness and their own power, and this is exactly what the Scottish thanes do, from the suppression of Macdonwald and Cawdor to the overthrow of Macbeth. The act of mounting atop a pole Macdonwald's and Macbeth's painted images, or better still their heads, is necessary as a totemic deterrent to tyranny, a public symbol of the inviolability of the social order and a glaring reminder of the inevitability of the moral law that sustains it: the wages of ambition is, and always must be, death. Macbeth had been an integral part of this social order, as Cawdor had been, so it is in no way surprising to see them both attempt to
conform their careers to the sacred fictions they were born into and carry around within them, Cawdor by repenting like a morality protagonist and Macbeth by remaining the arch tyrant to the end. Macbeth and Macduff understand one another perfectly, across the moral gulf that separates them, for both speak the primitive language of the tribe.

This is not to suggest that Shakespeare is simply holding up to ridicule the sacred myths, symbols, and forms that so pervade Macbeth. It is Marlowe, not Shakespeare, who is given to expressing an adolescent contempt for religion as something invented to "keep men in awe." The play is much more than an easy demystification of the ritual forms that dominate the consciousness and condition the actions of virtually all its principals, for it shows those forms to be at once quite arbitrary and fictive in themselves but wholly necessary and "real" in the social function they serve. In this respect, the play presents a stylization not only of Shakespeare's own society, where these Christian, ritual forms still prevail, but of all societies. It would be the height of ethnocentric naivete to view the "ecstatic" or "nostalgic" community depicted in Macbeth as any more primitive in its constitution than later, more "enlightened" societies in which heads are no longer mounted on poles. The gibbet in the eighteenth century—some of whose Shakespearean criticism does indeed condescend to his Elizabethan "barbarism,"—or the electric chair in the twentieth are designed to serve the same necessary function of deterring deviance within the community and to preserve the same necessary fiction that crime must inevitably be followed, as the night the day, by punishment. Moreover, the play depicts the impulse constitutive of every society to make its particular social forms and institutions, which are always arbitrary in so far as they are man-made, seem as necessary as natural forms and processes themselves, indeed a logical extension of them:

I have begun to plant thee and will labor
To make thee full of growing.

(I.iv.28-29)

What's more to do,
Which would be planted newly with the time—
As calling home our exiled friends abroad. . . .

(V.viii.64-66)

My way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf. . . .

(V.iii.22-26)

Within a world that sees itself through the ritual forms of the medieval drama, in which the book of human history and the book of nature are one volume of God's making, it is almost a reflex of all its members to describe the social and historical process of meting out rewards and punishments, for all its demonstrated fallibility, in an imagery of unfailing natural process. But to dismiss this impulse as a version of nostalgic fiction or pathetic fallacy is to misunderstand the play. For like Macbeth's, Duncan's, Lennox's, and the others' investment of the natural world with human attributes, these efforts to endow the human and historical world with a serene inevitability that properly belongs only to nonhuman nature is more than fiction and less than truth, another aspect of the persistent recreation of the sacred, the remystification of the merely secular, that defines the world of the play in its essential doubleness.

It is this radical equivocation of Macbeth in relation to its medieval models, the double sense in which it at once recreates those models through the communal effort of its characters and reveals them to be a means of social and institutional legitimation, that makes the play so susceptible to pious mystification or ironic
demystification. Of these possibilities for misinterpretation, the pious reading has of course prevailed. The play is generally regarded as a humanization and vivification, through the flesh and blood of Shakespeare's mature language and dramaturgy, of the bare skeleton of its stagy and didactic antecedents. In this view, their homiletic intent though it may be softened is not fundamentally questioned or altered in the process of benign and respectful transformation. The "good" characters are granted just enough of a depth they do not possess, and the "evil" characters are denied just enough of the depth they do possess, to flatten the play into a consistent domestication of a wholly traditional moral design. But surely it must be otherwise, for in what does Shakespeare's humanization of his sources consist but the putting into question of their conventional roles and forms? To the extent that the figures who carry around with them that older moral design as a sacred and un-self-conscious trust are made to appear conventional, predictable, and bidimensional by contrast with the figures with whom they share the stage and who are restless in their roles, however strenuously they attempt to conform to them, that older moral design can no longer be authoritative. Critics have always been responsive to the interiority of Macbeth's struggle, but they have been reluctant to recognize that it is achieved precisely at the expense of his status as a moral emblem or example. Yet he becomes something much more interesting to us than any moral emblem in the process, and not because, as the critical commonplace would have it, evil is intrinsically more interesting than good. Macbeth is more interesting than his prototypes and foils, not because they are good and he becomes evil—for Herod is hardly "good"—nor even because they "are" and he "becomes"—for his change is in many ways regressive—but because he cannot take his nature for granted. He cannot quite rest content in an action in which his role and his nature are determined in advance, but must continuously re-invent himself in the process of acting them out. It is in this that Macbeth's "modernity" consists and that his case bears directly on our own, at least to the extent that we are as fully human as he is. In this respect too, he becomes a very different kind of dramatic model, a type of modernity whose compelling interest for the playwrights who follow Shakespeare will cause him to be imitated again and again.

The simplifications that have become doctrine in the tradition of interpretation of Macbeth are the result not only of a failure to establish the play's relation to its models in its full ambivalence, but of a failure to identify the play's primary models in the first place. Just as Hamlet has less to do with Senecan revenge drama than with native morality tradition, so Macbeth has less to do with the morality play than with the tyrant plays of the Biblical cycles. Its nearest contemporary analogue is not Marlowe's Faustus, with which it is often compared as a parallel study in the psychology of damnation, but Tamburlaine or even Edward II, those early Elizabethan history plays which, like Macbeth, are modeled on the medieval tyrant plays that are the authentic prototypes of Elizabethan historical tragedy. The morality play is a misleading model in the interpretation of Macbeth in so far as it presents a world already more cerebral and voluntaristic than the cultic and animistic world of the cycles. It emphasizes, that is, freedom of moral choice within a mental setting, as opposed to the communal and typological destiny unfolded in the cycles. This misplaced emphasis on moral choice within Macbeth, where it receives little of the extended deliberation accorded to it in Hamlet, may well arise from the forced imposition of morality conventions upon the play and may well underlie all the misguided adulation of the bland and reticent Banquo and the equally misguided pity for Macbeth. For Macbeth's choices and actions, as I have tried to show, are not free in the way the morality protagonist's are, but are largely determined by his own and his society's expectations soon after the play begins. The universe of Macbeth is not ultimately and comically free, as it is even in those variations of the morality (like Faustus) where the protagonist persists in choosing wrongly and thus qualifies as an object of tragic pity, but is conditioned by forces largely outside his control. Of course those forces are no longer the benign and providential ones embodied in the figures of God and his angels who descend from above upon the human community below. Rather, they are disruptive forces that periodically and inexplicably bubble up, as it were, from within human nature and society, as the witches who incarnate and herald them seem to do from within the earth itself. Unlike the morality protagonist, who is confronted at all points with a clear choice between moral meanings already established by generations of sophisticated theological apologetics, Macbeth, and the protagonist of Elizabethan historical tragedy generally, must struggle with meaning as it ambiguously unfolds in the world. It is only by confusing these two dramatic modes that such reassuring commonplaces as "the
Elizabethan world picture" or "the great chain of being" could misleadingly have been applied as a norm in the interpretation of Shakespeare's histories and tragedies in the first place, as if the "natural condition" they present were order and the life of man could be analogized to the life of nonhuman nature. In our own struggle with the meaning of Macbeth, the proper identification of those models actually implicit within the play thus proves crucial and affirms once again the interdependence of literary history and interpretation.

Notes


2 Wickham, p. 215.

3 J. M. Manly, ed., Specimens of the Pre-Shakespearean Drama (Boston, 1900), vol. I, p. 510.


9The Towneley Plays, p. 73.

10The Towneley Plays, p. 73.

11 Wickham, pp. 230-231.

12Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays, p. 27.

13 "It [Macbeth's atrocity against Macduff's family] is not nursed malice (they are 'unfortunate' souls), but murder for thesis, a deed in which all that makes an act recognisably human, whether moral or immoral, has been by-passed." Wilbur Sanders, The Dramatist and the Received Idea (Cambridge, 1968), p. 270. That the impulse behind Macbeth's "thesis" of dehumanization remains "recognizably human" and hardly as alienating in its effect as Sanders claims is confirmed by the fact that he can still call his victims "unfortunate," that he adopts it precisely for its promise of destroying his human sympathies, and that he never completely achieves its aim of self-demonization. Sanders's essay, in its responsiveness to the dramatic phenomenon of Macbeth and resistance to the received moral ideas that surround it, represents a genuine advance in interpretation of the play despite occasional atavisms.

14 By changing their nature from the "goddesses of destinie" of Holinshed's Chronicle to Elizabethan witches, Shakespeare subtly but significantly curtails the weird sisters' power of determination. It is now Macbeth's actions that make the prophecies "come true" and not the prophecies that reveal a predetermined truth. Of course he will be conquered when Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane, but only if he leaves his seige-proof castle to meet it; of course he must beware Macduff, once he slaughters his family; of course Macduff alone
has the power to harm Macbeth, but only when Macbeth recognizes him as one not of woman born. On the grounding of the prophecies in a purely natural "law of retributive reaction," see the excellent discussion by Sanders, pp. 253-307.


16 The term "ecstatic" is aptly applied to Shakespeare's tragic societies by Northrop Frye, *Foods of Time* (Toronto, 1967), p. 29, and "nostalgic" by Alvin Kernan, "The Henriad: Shakespeare's Major History Plays," *The Yale Review*, LIX (1969), 1, 3-32, to the older, passing world of the second tetralogy. The concept is further elaborated by Maynard Mack, Jr., *Killing the King* (New Haven, 1972). It is worth noting that the object Macduff carries in the closing scene of D'Avenant's revision of the play (1674) is not Macbeth's "head" but his "sword." The substitution, part of a larger effort to render Shakespeare seemly by rendering him bloodless, works to obscure the primitive essence of the Scottish society of Shakespeare's play and the underlying similarity between Macduff and Macbeth as creatures of it.

17 See, for example, Helen Gardner, "Milton's Satan and the Theme of Damnation in Elizabethan Tragedy," *Essays and Studies*, I (1948), 42-61. The fundamental inappropriateness of morality models to *Macbeth* is also apparent from D'Avenant's version, where Macbeth is reduced to a personification of Tyranny and Ambition (at his death, the stage direction reads "Ambition dies"), and the sharpest possible moral contrast, summed up in Macduff's closing couplet, is aimed at: "His Vice shall make your Virtue shine more Bright, / As a Fair Day succeeds a Stormy Night." The moralization of the play is carried a stage further toward absurdity in Garrick's additions to J. P. Kemble's acting copy (1795), in which Macbeth becomes a pale and frightened Faustus before his death:

Ambition's vain delusive dreams are fled,
And now I wake to darkness, guilt and horror;
I cannot bear it! let me shake it off—
It will not be; my soul is clog'd with blood—
I cannot rise! I dare not ask for mercy—
It is too late, hell drags me down; I sink,
I sink,—my soul is lost for ever!—Oh!—
Oh!—Dies.


**Robert G. Hunter (essay date 1976)**

**SOURCE:** "*Macbeth*" in *Shakespeare and the Mystery of God's Judgments*, The University of Georgia Press, 1976, pp. 159-82.

*[In the essay below, Hunter discusses the human and supernatural origins of evil both in the play and in the mind of its protagonist.]*

*Macduff* was from his Mothers womb Untimely ript.

So much of *Macbeth* is concentrated in this "horrid image" that a tracing of all its metaphoric connections would result in an essay on the whole play. Macbeth, for example, first enters our consciousness when the bleeding captain describes how he ripped the life from merciless Macdonwald by unseaming him from the nave to the chops. To list all the torn bodies that fill the space between that image and the play's end would be almost as tedious as it was for Macbeth to wade through the resulting blood. Fewer and more to our point are
the instances of the more specific images of a bloody child. The figure is literally present, an ironic clue to hidden meaning, as one of the apparitions that the juggling fiends use to trap Macbeth. The child's advice to be bloody, bold, and resolute, Macbeth puts into practice by having his murderers stab Macduff's little son to death before his mother's eyes. Early in the play another version of mother and child is suggested to us by Lady Macbeth's claim that she would snatch the nursing baby from her breast and dash its brains out if she had sworn to do so. But perhaps the most meaningful as well as the most enigmatic of these children is Pity, which Macbeth, in the "If'twere done" soliloquy in act I, scene 7, describes as a naked, newborn babe. Because the helplessness of the babe inspires pity, the personification is appropriate, but this is an odd infant, for it strides the blast—walking upon the wind, or bestriding it, perhaps, or marching to the trumpet sound of Duncan's pleading virtues. But Pity is also like one of heaven's cherubin, one of God's angelic instruments, because Macbeth's great enemy, and hence a prime servant of divine justice, is decent human emotion—compassion, the horror and pity that will be aroused by the sight of the murdered, virtuous Duncan. So the bloody child is Macbeth's enemy, the innocent inspiration for compassion.

In the beginning the source of such inhibiting compassion is within as well as outside Macbeth, and that is why Lady Macbeth symbolizes its destruction by the murder of life to which she has given birth. The bloody body of Macduff's young son is proof, if we need any, that Macbeth's inhuman cruelty finally achieves the intensity urged on him by his wife. But the blood which covers the body of the child which Lady Macbeth murders in imagination and Macbeth has killed by his murderers in reality is the blood of the child itself. The blood upon the apparition is ambiguous. It may be the child's and it may not and at the moment it does not occur to us to wonder which it is. But the image of the newborn Macduff is unequivocal. This child is covered with the blood of its mother and thus act 5 presents us with a companion piece to the diabolical madonna of act I. Lady Macbeth imagines a mother who has killed her child. Macduff presents us with a child whose birth has killed its mother.

The pairing of these icons directs us to questions which are central to our concerns. Lady Macbeth's imagined infanticide is the most horrible crime it is possible for her to conceive, and most of us would, I hope, admit the difficulty of going her one better. The murder's special horror derives from its supreme unnaturalness. But what about the horror of the death of Macduff's mother? It is the result of the natural processes of nature in a fallen world. The newborn child, symbol of innocence, cannot, we tell ourselves, be made guilty of the blood with which it is covered. Its life results in death, but there is no element of willed action that could turn that responsibility into guilt. The natural processes of a postlapsarian nature may result in events as cruel and horrible as the crimes of Macbeth, but the events are not therefore crimes, because the element of will is missing. Except, of course, that it isn't. Will is present if the events of nature are conceived of as ultimately caused by divine will. The proper Christian response to such events as deaths in childbirth is, "Thy will be done." Which leads us to ask ourselves if this is also the proper Christian response to the crimes of humanity. All Christian theologies, I think, agree that human crimes are made to serve divine purposes, and most maintain that no such crimes could be committed without divine permission, but the crimes of men are held to be the results of the wills of men and as such, deserving of divine punishment. This conclusion is easily acquiesced in so long as the human will is held to be free. Lutheranism and Calvinism, however, deny the freedom of the will, but continue to insist that the eternal punishment of the reprobate is just. All men justly deserve punishment because all are born corrupted by original sin. This, I presume, is the final significance of the bloody child. Any newborn babe is as guilty and as subject to eternal punishment as Lady Macbeth herself.

The child ripped from its mother's womb grows up to become Macduff and in so doing embodies three times the human condition of simultaneous guilt and innocence. In being born he is guilty and innocent of the death of his mother. But he is also guilty and innocent of the deaths of his wife and children. They die for the courage of his opposition to Macbeth and for the stupidity of his abandonment of his family. Unlike Hamlet, Macduff feels guilt rather than responsibility for these deaths:
Sinful Macduff,
They were all strooke for thee: Naught that I am,
Not for their owne demerits, but for mine
Fell slaughter on their soules.

(4.3.224-227)

Finally he kills Macbeth. For that death, quite properly, he feels no guilt at all. Like Hamlet, he kills as the scourge and minister of heaven, and as such he is no more (or less) guilty than the child ripped from his mother's womb. In Hamlet's play the mystery of the antagonist's evil was dramatized by Claudius's inability to repent. In Macbeth antagonist has become protagonist and the examination of the mystery is much more complicated as a result.

But if Macduff stands to Macbeth in the relationship of Hamlet to Claudius, he stands more obviously as a symbolically highly complicated version of Richmond in relation to Richard III. In our terms, Macbeth, after Hamlet and Othello, is a return to the concerns of Richard III. It is a triumphal return, to be sure. Shakespeare's ability to create characters and to devise symbolic actions, as well as his command of poetic language, are markedly subtler and more powerful than they were fifteen years earlier. It is important to remember that these skills are not merely Shakespeare's means of expressing thought. They are his means of thought, and as his means increase in subtlety and power his thought grows more complex, profound, and difficult to understand. In Henry VI, Part 3 and Richard III, a series of slaughtered innocents brought to our attention the possible presence of a jealous God whose justice visited the sins of guilty fathers upon their children unto the third and fourth generations. In Macbeth the image of the bloody child is in the visual and verbal texture of the play, profoundly a part of the way the play exists as a work of art, and the result is to deepen the meaning—or rather the mystery—of this human suffering in a way that makes Shakespeare's previous employment of it seem brutally obvious. Nonetheless, the connection between the early histories and Macbeth is clear. The last two plays of the first tetralogy share with Macbeth a common pattern and a common problem. Like Richard III, Macbeth presents us with a story which must be apprehended in two different ways simultaneously—as the providential tragedy or tragicomedy of a society and as the psychological tragedy of a villain protagonist.

The providential tragicomedy opens with a society in revolt—in, that is to say, a state of sin, for the king revolted against is a lawful monarch and a saintly man. The indistinct figures of the merciless Macdonwald, Sweno the Norway's king, and the Thane of Cawdor are important for the sense they give us that Macbeth's murder of Duncan is not, like Claudius's fratricide, a personal crime primarily, but rather one which a sizable proportion of the society is trying to commit and for which the entire society will inevitably suffer. The second scene of Macbeth is thematically a condensation of the History plays' narrative of the War of the Roses. The rebels are sinning against God as well as man and the war they wage threatens to "memorize another Golgotha"—except of course that it is Macbeth whom the bloody captain describes as meaning to do so, and it is Macbeth who does so. The murder of Duncan is a hideous blasphemy:

Most sacrilegious Murther hath broke ope
The Lords anoynted Temple, and stole thence
The Life o'th'Building. 

(2.3.71-73)

And the death of Duncan, like the death of Christ, is attended with storm and darkness. Rosse has the explanation: "Thou seest the Heavens, as troubled with mans Act, / Threatens his bloody Stage" (2.4.6-7). Here is the theatrical metaphor of the providential tragedy. God is present as spectator at the theater of his judgments but when necessary he will intervene as participant. "Man" is both individual and universal. The
"act" is Macbeth's, but it is also man's—witness the recent revolt—and man must suffer for it. The instrument for man's punishment will be—with a logic and justice that could only be divine—the specific man who did the act for which man will be punished. But, of course, in God's good time, the evil minister of chastisement will be destroyed as a punishment for his crimes, including those he has committed as the instrument of chastisement. Grace, in the person of Malcolm, will be restored to Scotland.

The inadequacy of this design as a description of the action of Macbeth is perfectly obvious but it is one of the patterns that make up the play's complexity. Shakespeare's main interest, as it was in Richard III, is in the nature and meaning of the evil instrument and that is the subject of the other, the psychological tragedy. But Shakespeare has developed (or retained from Hamlet) an interest in God's good instruments as well. A part of the functioning of the tasteless and colorless Richmond of Richard III has in Macbeth been assigned to Macduff and another part to Malcolm. The interest of these figures is not in the least psychological. Malcolm and Macduff have not been endowed with minds in the way that Macbeth, Othello, Iago, Hamlet, Claudius, and Richard have. Their interest—and particularly Macduff's—lies in their symbolic complexity, the complexity of their functions in the Macbeth world.

In this sense, Malcolm is the less complicated of the two. His function is to be good, a dull proceeding in the theater, however difficult in life. Shakespeare enlivens his character by following Holinshed and having him, in act 4, scene 3, pretend to be bad in order to try Macduff's sincerity. The result is a scene in danger of being tedious if regarded only as a piece of theatrical naturalism, or an "atmospheric" device for depicting the loss of confidence in human beings that is one result of tyranny. Its important subject is the mystery of grace. In convincing Macduff of his insatiable voluptuousness and his staunchless avarice, Malcolm describes a potential or possible Malcolm, a vessel and instrument of wrath, one who, like Macbeth, exists to

    Poure the sweet Milke of Concord, into Hell,
    Uprore the universali peace, confound
    All unity on earth.

(4.3.98-100)

He then reveals that he is not in fact the villainous Macbeth-equivalent that he has pretended to be. But not being Macbeth does not, of course, make him the opposite of Macbeth. All, and it is rather a good deal, that Malcolm claims for himself is a prior innocence. Up to this point in his life, he has refrained from doing evil. He is not saying "I am good," but "I have been good up to now." Macbeth's true opposite is Edward the Confessor as described by the doctor and by Malcolm. The job of the actor playing Malcolm is to convince us that Edward is his chosen potentiality, the royal possibility that Malcolm wills himself to become. But it is up to us to wonder if it lies within the power of any unaided human will to become what Edward is described as being:

    He hath a heavenly guift of Prophesie,
    And sundry Blessings hang about his Throne,
    That speake him full of Grace.

(4.3.157-159)

The orthodox, Augustinian answer, and one that is clearly supported by Malcolm's speech, is that grace is the unmerited gift of God. This is, of course, an answer that creates a question: is the opposite of Edward equally the result of God's will, of the withholding of grace? This is one of the questions Shakespeare examines by creating the characters of Macbeth and his wife.
Macduff’s symbolic function is considerably more complicated than Malcolm’s, and one way of understanding it is, I think, to see it in the light of Shakespeare’s concerns in Hamlet. Like Hamlet—though like him in no other way—Macduff is the elect instrument for the destruction of an evil king. But in Macbeth Shakespeare explored the psychological meaning of the concept. In Macbeth he limits himself largely to a symbolic exploration through the image of the bloody child. Largely, but not entirely. In depicting Macduff’s agony for what he sees as his guilt for the deaths of his wife and children, Shakespeare is dramatizing realistically the horrors of life under tyranny. He is also dramatizing one of the ways in which an instrument of divine justice comes into being. By killing Macduff’s innocent family, Macbeth is teaching his enemy bloody instructions, which will return to plague the inventor. Perhaps the most terrible sentence in the play is Macduff’s reply to Malcolm’s urging of revenge: “He ha’s no Children.” There is little doubt, however, what their fate would be if they existed and were left to Macduff’s mercies. If Macduff does not become guilty of Macbeth’s most horrible crimes, it is because he cannot. Malcolm is right in the speech which concludes the scene in England: “the Powres above / Put on their Instruments.” But it is not a pretty sight. Macduff’s example suggests one meaning for election: the good man will not do the evil that he cannot do.

The primary concern of the play is with the evil man, however, and with the question of the guilt of the evil. The consideration of the theme leads Shakespeare to create a world of double evil—human and superhuman—and to speculate dramatically on their interrelationship. Chronologically, in terms of the succession of scenes, supernatural evil—the witches—is presented as prior to human evil, as the fall of Satan is prior to the fall of man. But man in Macbeth is fallen and Macbeth’s mind, like all human minds, though to an extraordinary degree, is prepared for the witches before he meets them. His first line “So foule and faire a day I have not seene” (1.3.38) seems to indicate that he is tuned in to the witches in some extrasensory fashion. And yet his variant of the witches’ “faire is foule, and foule is faire” is morally neutral: the weather is terrible and the battle is won, a human observation on a banal paradox which is reassuringly different from the witches’ diabolical reversal of moral values. Ordinary humanity soon ceases to obtain, however. Macbeth’s reaction to the third witch’s “All haile Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter” constitutes the first mystery of the play. Banquo asks our question: “why doe you start, and seeme to fear / Things that doe sound so faire?” Macbeth soon tells us, though not Banquo:

This supernaturall solliciting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good.
If ill? why hath it given me earnest of sucesse,
Commencing in a Truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
If good? why doe I yeeld to that suggestion,
Whose horrid Image doth unfixe my Heire,
And make my seated Heart knock at my Ribbes,
Against the use of Nature? Present Feares
Are lesse than horrible Imaginings:
My Thought, whose Murther yet is but fantasticali,
Shakes so my single state of Man,
That Function is smother’d in surmise,
And nothing is, but what is not.

(1.3.130-142)

Macbeth fears the contents of his own mind, and well he might. If I were told that I was to be king hereafter my mind would provide me with Malvolian images for contemplation: myself seated in my state, in my branched velvet gown, receiving homage. Macbeth imagines the murdered Duncan. The oddity is rationally inexplicable. Macbeth tries to explain it by seeing his mind as the object of temptation, of “supernaturall solliciting,” and the immediate source of the “horrid image” as a “suggestion” to which he has yielded. But there has been no soliciting and no suggestion audible to the audience. The witches have simply presented
Macbeth with a morally neutral fact about the future, one which asks nothing whatever of him either in thought or action, and he knows this:

If Chance will have me King,
Why Chance may Crowne me,
Without my stirre.

(1.3.150-152)

The play's word for Macbeth's odd psychological state at this moment in the action is "rapt" and it is used twice, once by Banquo ("Looke how our Partner's rapt") and once, in his letter to Lady Macbeth, by Macbeth himself. The word is suggestive. Clearly both Banquo and Macbeth intend to indicate some such natural condition as that defined by the O.E.D.: "Transported with some emotion . . . Deeply engaged or buried in (a feeling, subject of thought, etc.); intent upon." But the word has stronger supernatural meanings as well and "rapt" suggests, I think, the possibility that Macbeth's condition may bear some resemblance to the "raptus Pauli." Perhaps Macbeth, on the road to Forres, has an experience similar to Saul's on the road to Damascus. "Trembling and astonyed" he may be possessed and converted by an exterior, superhuman force. If so the force is diabolical rather than divine and this possibility—that the forces of evil may have a way into and power over the human mind analogous to that of divine grace—accounts for some measure of the difference in complexity and intensity of the characterization of Macbeth by comparison with his earlier version in Richard III.

What "enraptures" Macbeth is not, however, the words of the witches but the image which those words inspire, the horrid image of murder. The problem of the precise origin of that image and of others like it is crucial to our understanding of the protagonist and the play. The origin of any image is, of course, the imaginative faculty of the mind in which it appears, but Shakespeare makes it difficult to dismiss as purely subjective the horrid image by which Macbeth is originally "rapt" by making it the first of a series of four. The other three, the bloody dagger, the voice which cries "Sleep no more," and the ghost of Banquo, form a progression of phenomena whose pure subjectivity is made to seem increasingly doubtful. Macbeth knows that the first image of murder is "but fantasticali." About the second he has doubts. Perhaps it is "a Dagger of the Minde." He thinks he heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more" and knows he may merely have thought it. But he does not doubt the reality of the ghost of Banquo for an instant and we are left to wonder if he is right or if Lady Macbeth is correct in characterizing the ghost as "the very painting" of Macbeth's fear.

But whatever the origin of these phenomena, one thing is clear: Macbeth is obsessed by images of evil. What is less clear is what we mean by "obsessed." Obsession may be an entirely natural process: "The action of any influence, notion or fixed idea, which persistently assails or vexes, esp. so as to discompose the mind" (O.E.D.). This is a reasonably precise description of the action upon Macbeth's mind of the notion of bloody, violent murder. But obsession may also be a supernatural process: "The hostile action of the devil or an evil spirit besetting any one; actuation by the devil or an evil spirit from without; the fact of being thus beset or actuated" (O.E.D.).

There are then, two opposed possible sources for the causes of Macbeth's raptness and his obsession. The origin of these psychic phenomena may be natural or supernatural. They may be the unaided products of Macbeth's imagination. But they may also be the result of the working of diabolical powers, either through the presentation of exterior stimuli to Macbeth's senses or through the direct working upon Macbeth's imagination of diabolically controlled physiological forces. But if the question of the source of the phenomena that obsess Macbeth admits of two possible answers, so does the question of their control. Is Macbeth's will free to exclude these images of evil from his mind? Again, it seems to me, the play does not give us an answer and as a result of Shakespeare's careful reticence in dealing with both these problems, anyone attempting to understand the play confronts a quadruple Macbeth, a character who may be conceived of in four different
ways. Macbeth may be criminal, or insane, or self-damned, or reprobate. If the source of his horrid images is within his own mind and within the control of his will, then he is a morally responsible criminal who freely conceives of and executes his crimes. If the source is within his own mind, but outside the control of his will, then he is a madman whose diseased psyche presents him with hallucinations so powerful that they force him to action. If the source is supernatural but his will is free and strong enough to drive the phenomena from his consciousness, then he is "sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" and he damned himself by choosing to permit the domination of the powers of evil over him. If the source is supernatural and his will is not free, then Macbeth is one of the Calvinist reprobate whom God has damned from eternity and abandoned to the powers of evil.

In the other three Shakespearean tragedies we have looked at, a similar though more limited choice of conceptual versions of the protagonist has been presented to us. But in each case, or so it seems to me, one possibility is emphasized as the most probable explanation of the protagonist's nature. Richard III appears most likely to be the reprobate instrument of divine providence. Hamlet, however mysteriously, seems to be an elect scourge and minister of heaven. Othello most probably is a free agent who through errors of judgment and wrong choice comes to desire damnation. But in the case of Macbeth, I think Shakespeare keeps the possibilities in suspension so that, at the play's end, the mystery is extraordinarily complex, almost as baffling, despite the strongly emphasized Christian context, as King Lear itself.

Our belief in the criminal Macbeth, a free agent freely conceiving and executing his crimes, is encouraged, particularly in the play's beginning, by the evidence that, despite his proclaimed nobility and courage, Macbeth is by nature a destroyer, a killer. The bloody sergeant's enthusiastic image of Macbeth's smoking sword unseaming Macdonwald from the nave to the chops prepares us to accept without surprise his notion that Macbeth meant to bathe in reeking wounds and memorize another Golgotha. By evoking his own dramatization of the killing of Caesar and coupling it with the crucifixion, Shakespeare suggests that, though he begins as a defender of order, Macbeth (like Banquo, who is also being described) is potentially an agent of strife and chaos. When we discover from Lady Macbeth that her husband wanted to kill Duncan before the supernatural soliciting, when neither time nor place adhered to make the murder possible, we realize that the identity is more than potential. Macbeth's moral nature does not require the supernatural as an explanation for why his mind presents him with strange images of death—the odd phrase used by Rosse to describe the corpses Macbeth has left behind him on the battlefield. Macbeth, we begin to suspect, is an artist in death whose imagination presents him with forms which he then brings into being, his (and confusion's) masterpiece being the corpse of the king.

If Macbeth's obsessive images are the creations of his own mind, unaided by supernatural powers, his degree of moral responsibility depends upon the freedom and strength of his will. If Macbeth's imagination is free of supernatural influence then his will may be also. If it is, and if it is not the naturally bound will of a madman, then Macbeth is a criminal who deserves whatever punishment is visited on him in this world and the next. The strongest evidence for the freedom and health of Macbeth's powers of choice is undoubtedly the soliloquy which begins, "If it were done when'tis done, then'twere well, / It were done quickly." The psychomachy there dramatized is won by the forces of reason, and of political reason in particular. Macbeth sees clearly that, leaving "the life to come" entirely out of consideration, there is a justice built into the operation of the political world of here and now. His murder of Duncan will be an example to the men he wishes to rule, particularly since there is no moral or political justification for the destruction of so good a king. Rational ambition must give way to other claims of reason which indicate so clearly that the fulfillment of ambition must be finally self-destructive.

The decisive clarity of this triumph of the reason can only emphasize the culpability of Macbeth when he capitulates to his wife's scorn of his manhood. Macbeth as criminal dominates our view of him at this point in the play, I think. We see him as freely conceiving and freely executing his crimes.
But our doubts of this identity begin at once. With the next soliloquy we start to suspect that Macbeth is, or is becoming, madder than we thought. The dagger which Macbeth sees and we do not and which he finally decides has no objective existence could be evidence of a sane mind under strain, sane enough, indeed, to recognize hallucination for what it is and to dismiss it at will. And yet this victory for reason does not result in the rule of reason. What replaces hallucination is an indulgence of the imagination in a theatrical self-contemplation which is a dissociation from the true self. Macbeth tries to dignify the sordid reality of a murderer sneaking up on his victim by decorating it with the inflated rhetoric of "wither'd Murder," "his Centinell the wolf," and "Tarquin's ravishing strides." The second half of the dagger soliloquy is Macbeth's equivalent of Othello's "Put out the light," an exalted prelude to the brutality of the crime which ensues. Shakespeare foregoes the dramatization of the crime and of the third of our phenomena, the voice which tells Macbeth that he shall sleep no more. As with the vision of the dagger, our natural assumption is that Macbeth is again hallucinating but the terror with which he describes the event is far more intense than his earlier reaction. Shakespeare, I think, is directing our minds toward two possibilities. The first is to strengthen our previous suspicion that Macbeth is or soon will be insane. Lady Macbeth encourages us:

These deeds must not be thought
After these wayes: so, it will make us mad.
You doe unbend your Noble strength, to thinke
So braine-sickly of things.

(2.2.33-34, 45-46)

The act of the murder has so taxed Macbeth's will that it no longer has the strength to control and repress his mind's horrible imaginings or to distinguish them from what really happens. But the terror which Macbeth communicates in his description of the voice might raise another possibility and would certainly have done so in the minds of all but the most skeptical Elizabethans. What if Macbeth is not going mad, but is being driven mad by supernatural powers intent on his destruction? One effect of Shakespeare's decision to have the third of our phenomena narrated is that we are free to doubt its purely subjective nature. Perhaps if we had been present, we would have heard it too.

There is no such doubt about Banquo's ghost. The evidence of the Folio stage directions, supported by Simon Forman's report of a 1610 production, make it as certain as these things can be that the ghost should be on stage for us to see. But what is the nature of what we see? Obviously it is not what Macbeth first takes it to be—the animated corpse of Banquo. No one except Macbeth and the audience can see it. It may be what Macbeth finally concludes it is—a horrible shadow, an unreal mockery, an illusion produced by the working of supernatural powers of evil upon Macbeth's mind. Or it may be a naturally explicable hallucination, the product of a guilty mind that has gone over the brink into madness. The ghost's visibility to us would then be the result of Shakespeare's decision to make Macbeth's insanity as vivid as the theater can. Finally there is a third possibility: the ghost may be Banquo's spirit, as the ghost in Hamlet is old Hamlet's spirit but visible only to Macbeth as old Hamlet is visible only to his son (and us) in the closet scene. In any case, it is at this point that the criminal Macbeth and the insane Macbeth become one. The free criminal, if that is what he is, has become the madman as a result of the evil he has done. Whether the fascination of doing evil has been at any time within the control of his will, Macbeth's doing of it has brought him to the condition of a raving lunatic. But having arrived at that condition, he does something quite astounding. By an effort of the will, he ceases to be mad. If we consider Macbeth as the prey to natural hallucination, then what we see and hear is a man issuing orders to his own mind: "Hence horrible shadow, / Unreall mock'ry hence" (3.4.119-120). The ghost disappears, and, although the play is only half over, its disappearance ends the series of puzzling phenomena we have been concerned with. From this point on Macbeth is plagued with no more "horrid images." They are replaced by illusions of a very different kind—the false expectations raised by the visions presented to him by the witches. But the change goes further than that.
It is hard to demonstrate, but I would maintain that the quality of Macbeth's mind is very different after his victory over the ghost of Banquo. In the first part of the play Macbeth is a man of action who thinks associatively, like a poet. His life is apprehended and created through his imagination and Shakespeare, by Macbeth's expression of it, brilliantly suggests the quality of such a life, evil as, in this case, it is: "Light thickens, / And the Crow makes Wing to th'Rookie Wood" (3.2.51-52). But once the ghost is conquered, this odd, cruel lyricism disappears from Macbeth's speech leaving dull brutality and bitterness in its place:

It will have blood, they say:
Blood will have Blood.

I am in blood
Stept in so farre, that should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go ore.

(3.4.123-124, 138-140)

If rapt is the best word for the Macbeth of the play's first half, "tedious" replaces it in the second half. Not, by any means, tedious to us. He remains fascinating. But tedious to himself. Macbeth has become a bored thug.

The best explanation for this puzzling change is probably to be found in the relationship of Macbeth's will to his imagination. The triumph of Macbeth's will is a Pyrrhic victory. In order to destroy the vision of Banquo's ghost, Macbeth must destroy its source, his imaginative power. Most imaginations wither slowly. Macbeth kills his. Only by murdering his imagination can Macbeth retain his sanity, but the sanity that remains to him is horrible, a kind of rational madness. The destruction of Macbeth's imagination by his will is an act of self-preservation, but the self preserved turns out to be much like Richard III's, an "I" that has neither pity, love, nor fear.

If Macbeth's obsession is natural, he conquers it by an act of partial self-destruction that leaves him, in a secular and temporal sense, a damned soul, desparing and brutish, whose life is a horror to be waded through. He remains that if his obsession is supernatural, but when we so consider him we see that there may be dimensions to the meaning of his tragedy that would escape us if we neglected the supernatural possibility. Not that we need much change our account of what happens to Macbeth and what he does about it if diabolical forces are responsible for the series of psychic phenomena we have considered. In either case Macbeth's imagination is the immediate source of image, vision, voice, ghost; and in destroying his imaginative powers, Macbeth is destroying the instrument through which the forces of evil exercise their power over him. The irony of this triumph of the will alters its nature, however. Diabolical powers are bent on destroying Macbeth by driving him insane through working upon his imagination. They succeed in destroying Macbeth by forcing him to destroy his imagination in order to preserve his sanity. But this act of self-preservation turns out simultaneously to be an act of spiritual self-destruction. Is the triumph of evil over Macbeth inevitable then? I believe the play suggests that it may be. But it also suggests that it may not be.

If the play is taking place in an Augustinian world, then the power of evil over Macbeth's mind must be permitted by God, but the Augustinian God, though he permits the triumph of evil, ought not to permit its inevitable triumph. The possibility of a saving choice should be open to Macbeth—and perhaps it is. The diabolical temptations and torments to which Macbeth is subjected may also be manifestations of divine grace. When Macbeth has heard the witches'prophecy he yields to the "suggestions" that in order to become king he must murder Duncan. The form of that suggestion is a vision of the murdered king:

that suggestion,
Whose horrid Image doth unfixe my Heire,
And make my seated Heart knock at my Ribbes,
Against the use of Nature.

(1.3.140-143)

A suggestion is a "prompting or incitement to evil . . . a temptation of the evil one" (O.E.D.). The paradox of this temptation is obvious: it repels while attracting. Temptations often do. That the horror has a perverse attraction for Macbeth does not however cancel its nature for him as horror. The temptation takes a form that warns the tempted against yielding to it and thus the origin of the horrid image may be as much divine as diabolical. The same can be said for the bloody dagger. Macbeth interprets it as marshaling him the way that he is going but another mind might take it as a barrier in his way and so Macbeth's rejection of it may be a rejection of divine warning. The voice that cries "sleep no more" can even more obviously be the threat of divine justice as well as the triumph of the devil. Finally the ghost of Banquo, which drives Macbeth to the brink of madness, may simultaneously be driving him toward true sanity through the sacrament of penance. Macbeth, as a result of the vision of Banquo's ghost, is brought to something like Claudius's psychological condition after "The Mousetrap." If he were to repent, confess his sin, and suffer its temporal consequences, he would save his soul. Thus the whole series of psychic or supernatural phenomena partake of a possible double nature and reveal that Macbeth's imaginative faculty is potentially as much the instrument of grace for his salvation as the instrument of evil for his temptation and destruction.

But the possible double nature of these phenomena is not the only evidence for the working of grace upon Macbeth through his imagination. Again, in the "If it were done" soliloquy, Macbeth's arrival, for once, at a correct choice is attributable not simply to the action of right reason upon the will, but to the action of the imagination as well. Macbeth's stated purpose in the soliloquy is to confine his thought to a consideration simply of his temporal situation "here, upon this Banke and Schoole of time," jumping the life to come. He concludes as a result of an eminently rational process of thought that judgment will be visited upon him even here, and that he must therefore refrain from murder. But throughout this logical consideration of a practical moral and political problem, the imagery in which his thought takes form betrays the presence beneath the conscious surface of his mind of the pressure upon it of his knowledge and fear of eternity and this presence may well be evidence of the working of grace. When, for example, he comes to consider the evenhanded justice that will see to it that the murderer of Duncan will himself become the victim of a murderer whom he has taught to kill, Macbeth's poetic imagination personifies the idea. He embodies the concept, however, not as the usual blindfolded lady with the scales, but as the commender of a chalice to the lips—an image of the evenhanded priest at the sacrament of Communion. The image is a natural result of the fact that Macbeth has just come from what he has proposed shall be the saintly Duncan's last supper, but it is also evidence of the possible existence of forces within his mind, but not of it, that present his consciousness with thoughts that will not let him "jump the life to come." Again, when he considers what effect the saintliness of Duncan may have upon the men who will determine whether to punish his killer, he imagines Duncan's virtues pleading: "like Angels, Trumpet-tongu'd against / The deepe damnation of his taking off (1.7.1920). Virtues plead, like angels, against damnation most notably in the highly popular allegory of the Four Daughters of God where Justice and Truth, Mercy and Peace argue the fate of fallen man before their divine Father and are reconciled when Christ agrees to satisfy justice by taking upon himself the punishment which man deserves. The form which Christ's pity for humanity inspires him to assume is that of a naked newborn babe and that is the form which Macbeth imagines for the pity that will inspire men to destroy him if he murders Duncan. Within the confines of this soliloquy then, Shakespeare has Macbeth use imagery that suggests God's decision to save fallen man through Christ's atonement, the Nativity and the Last Supper.

For a modern reader of the play this emergence of images of eternity into a soliloquy ostensibly devoted to the political and moral decisions of here and now is a brilliant example of Shakespeare's ability to convey a sense of the unconscious mind working upon the consciousness. But what for us is evidence of the unconscious is for Shakespeare's time explicable as extra-psiсhic, as supernatural, so that some of Shakespeare's brilliance as an imitator of the human psyche may have its origin in a desire to suggest that at times the contents and
movements of the mind are the result of forces outside the mind itself. Here his verse suggests, I think, how grace may strive to work upon Macbeth's will through the power of his imagination. Reason and imagination combine to bring Macbeth to the rejection of evil. Then Lady Macbeth enters and the work of grace is overthrown. Macbeth's will freely rejects its earlier decision and he continues on the course which leads to his damnation.

If the origin of the psychic phenomena is supernatural and if Macbeth's will is free, then Macbeth is self-damned, for if evil works on him through the power of his imagination, so does grace and his will chooses to obey the promptings of the former. But one last possible Macbeth remains. If Macbeth's mind is subject to the suggestions of the supernatural and if his will is not free, then he is a reprobate sinner as conceived by Calvin, one upon whose damnation God decided in his secret councils before the creation of the world.

In Macbeth the evidence for this most frightening of tragic possibilities is found largely in the nature of time and the characters' relationship to it. Shakespeare uses the witches and their prophecies to suggest that the future may be immutable. W. C. Curry explains the witches' power of foreseeing the future as the result of a superhuman version of logical inference from their superior understanding of the causes of things: "In this sense, the demons, having lost nothing of their angelic nature, know the future development of events conjecturally though not absolutely." This is convincing enough so long as the only prophecies in question are those about Macbeth's future glories. But the later misleading revelations are considerably harder to account for. Perhaps the witches might have known that Macduff was born by Caesarean section and that he was likely to kill Macbeth. But how could they foresee Malcolm's sudden development of a talent for camouflage and the precise moment and form of its expression? Or what except supernatural knowledge of what must occur in the future could have informed them that Banquo's descendants would turn out to be the House of Stuart?

The witches necessarily give us the strong sense that what Lady Macbeth calls "this ignorant present" is that instant in which the illusion of possibility can exist, but only because ignorance allows it to. The immutable future seems subject to the exercise of will because we cannot see it in the instant. In fact it exists with the same finality as the past and it is known with the same certainty to supernatural intelligence. But the importance of the relationship of the characters to future time is considerably larger than that suggested by the witches' enigmatic knowledge of what will be hereafter. The significant differences between Macbeth and his wife and the changes that take place in their natures are defined and determined by their different and altering relationships to time. In the first two acts of the play it is obvious enough that each is dominated by a different psychic element. Macbeth embodies imagination. Lady Macbeth embodies will. What each in this way is determines the difference in each of the quality of his knowledge of what will be. Macbeth apprehends the future sensually. He knows the murder of Duncan by his experience of the horrid image. He sees the bloody dagger before he has brought it into existence. He experiences the future torture of his mind, the restless ecstasy that lies ahead of him, when he hears the voice cry, "Sleep no more." Lady Macbeth, on the other hand knows what will be because she wills it to be: "Glamys thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be / What thou art promis'd" (1.5.13-14). Her knowledge of the future is less apprehension than information. Duncan will be killed because she has determined that he will be. If she had sworn to dash her baby's brains out, that would happen too. Macbeth's letter transports her beyond this ignorant present because it instructs her will. All in all she is a frightening demonstration of the stupendousness of the will when it is not informed by imagination. Her reason foresees results but not consequences, so she can invite evil to possess her without regarding the invitation as more than a necessary precondition for Duncan's murder. Once done, it will be done, "what's done, is done"—or so she thinks. Macbeth's apprehending, associating, essentially poetic mind knows better: the assassination cannot trammel up the consequence. The truth that Lady Macbeth discovers is very simple: the past does not cease to exist, but it does pass beyond the power of the will to alter it.
Not only that, the existence of the unalterable past saps the power of the will to control the future—or to believe that it can control the future. Macbeth asserts his will to subjugate his imagination and the result is a new Macbeth incapable of fully experiencing either past, present, or future, a Macbeth who is an easy prey to the juggling and paltering of the witches. The vacuum left by the disappearance of his own imaginative vision of the future is easily filled by the misleading, the merely factual information of the witches. His will has lost the game by winning it. And the paradoxical triumph of Macbeth's will is simultaneously the defeat of his will-dominated wife.

Lady Macbeth's relationship to the play's time is oddly stationary. She exercises her will in turn upon future, present, and past. When the future she wills into existence becomes the present, she ceases to have a future, and when it has become the past, she ceases to have a present as well. From the beginning she is locked into the moment of the murder. At first her function is to will the murder into existence and until that moment, her function smothers surmise. When the moment arrives, her will successfully exercises itself by imposing upon that bit of time the order needed to prevent disaster. She can return the daggers because she refuses to allow her imagination to discover the meaning of what she will see when she sees the murdered Duncan:

\[
\ldots \text{the sleeping, and the dead,} \\
\text{Are but as Pictures: 'tis the Eye of Childhood,} \\
\text{That feares a painted Devili.}
\]

(2.2.55-57)

Life and death are no more meaningful to her than art, and without imagination neither life, death, nor art can have meaning.

But once his wife's will has brought him safely past the moment of Duncan's murder, Macbeth begins to deprive her will of its future-determining function:

LADY: What's to be done?
MACB. Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest Chuck, 
Till thou applaud the deed.

(3.2.45-47)

He starts to savor the pleasure of the future's imagined crimes:

\[
\text{Come, seeling Night,} \\
\text{Skarfe up the tender Eye of pittfull Day,} \\
\text{And with thy bloodie and invisible Hand} \\
\text{Cancell and teare to pieces that great Bond,} \\
\text{Which keepes me pale.}
\]

(3.2.47-51)

But these horrible imaginings must be paid for when they have become realities and as past crimes they erupt into the present in the form of Banquo's ghost. Again Lady Macbeth's will must try, this time more frantically, to preserve the order of the present moment. Desperately she deploys her familiar arguments. Macbeth is not a man. The ghost is but a picture, the painting of his fear. But she is powerless against this strange image of death. Only Macbeth's will can control it, but though his will succeeds in doing so, the victory comes too late for Lady Macbeth. Macbeth has ruined the party:
You have displac'd the mirth,
Broke the good meeting, with most admir'd disorder.

(3.4.108-120)

at once, goodnight.
Stand not upon the order of your going,
But go at once.

(3.4.118-120)

The essentially suburban nature of her evil mind is nowhere more apparent than in the moment of its defeat. But it will not do to overemphasize the merely bourgeois quality of her aspirations. The festivity which Banquo's ghost has interrupted is an emblem of the measure, time, and place which was last possible in the banquet that preceded Duncan's murder and which will become possible again only when the butcher and his fiendlike queen are dead. The efforts of her will to impose such order upon the present have proved futile and the present has turned out to be the product of an immutable past which was once a future that her will apparently determined. The function of her will is smothered at that moment when Macbeth's will smothers his "surmise." After the departure of her guests she has barely twenty exhausted words to speak to her husband before she leaves the play, returning only as a will-less, imagination-haunted sleepwalker.

We see her in that scene, caught in her moment, the one she has willed and which she can now neither escape nor alter. She has become a walking shadow tormented by shadows, but unlike Richard the Third or her husband, she cannot respond to the unalterable outside herself by altering herself. She can only escape by destroying herself. As with Richard and Macbeth, her death leaves us in doubt about the real power of her apparently determining will. In *Macbeth* the suspicion that the events of the play are preordained is always present and that suspicion is a logical inference from the witches'knowledge of the contents of future time. This possibility is given poetic expression by Macbeth's last great speech. There Macbeth's sense of himself as poised between meaningless yesterdays and meaningless tomorrows comes into focus on the enigmatic phrase "recorded time" with its implication that all time, future as well as past, is history, a matter of eternal record. Man's considerations of possibility, his exercises of will, are predicated on an illusion of possibility. His psychomachies are sciamachies, the struggles of a walking shadow. The literary metaphor that concludes the speech is an answer to and a development of Rosse's early theatrical metaphor for the intervention of divine providence. Man's acts are nothing more than the strutting and fretting of a poor player and the bloody stage is not his, but the idiot's who has invented the tale that is being told upon it. Our sense that in *Macbeth* life may be meaningless arises, however, not from an idiotic lack of logical coherence in the action, but from its opposite, the sense that the form of Macbeth's life, is, to adapt Coleridge's critical distinction, mechanical rather than organic. If the events of Macbeth's tragic existence have been predetermined by divine power, if indeed "Der Herr Gott würfelt nicht," then the bitterness of "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" is entirely justified.

The last of our four Macbeths, the predestined reprobate instrument and object of God's wrath, suggests the existence of a world conceived by Calvin and recreated imaginatively by Shakespeare. Each of the other three possible Macbeths similarly suggests a world that would account for his nature. The criminal who freely conceives and executes his crimes embodies evil in a Pelagian universe. The man whose own mind pushes him to the brink of madness and who must destroy his imagination in order to survive inhabits a world ruled by natural determinism. The Macbeth who freely chooses to follow the promptings of supernatural evil rather than those of divine grace inhabits the universe created by Augustine's God and embodies in it the same mystery that Claudius defines in *Hamlet*. The coexistence of these versions of our reality has characterized the other three plays we have examined. But Richard III appears most likely to be a creature of Calvin's God. Othello seems to inhabit a Pelagian world, though one whose optimism has been tragically qualified by
Shakespeare's sense of the ways in which our minds are bound by their very natures. The Augustinian solution to Hamlet's mystery seems more satisfactory than any other, but in his tragedy, as in the other plays, probability is never certainty and the mystery remains a mystery. In Macbeth, it seems to me, no possibility predominates. The various suggested causes of the protagonist's tragic destruction coexist in perfect equilibrium.

But, of course, the destruction of the protagonist does not conclude the play's action and Macbeth's last great speech is not the play's final word. The beneficence of providence is reasserted strongly at the end. As a result of his killing of Macbeth, Macduff tells us, "The time is free," suggesting that our previous sense of its enslavement was, though accurate, the result of a special condition—the temporary subjection of the play's world to evil through the capitulation to diabolical forces by Macbeth and his wife. Now, to take up Malcolm's vocabulary, the threat and fact of chaos have given way to "measure, time and place." Thanks to "the grace of grace," justice and mercy have been restored to Scotland and the retributive portion of justice has already begun to operate in the destruction "of this dead Butcher, and his Fiend-like Queene."

The element of the unsatisfactory in this highly satisfactory conclusion needs careful definition. It stems in part from the inadequacy of the words butcher and fiend. Our experience of Macbeth and his wife has been so complex that this simplicity inevitably calls attention to itself. Not, in my opinion, because we find the terms too harsh. They are as deserved as the fates of the people to whom they apply. For the purposes of Shakespearean temporal justice, a man is what he has done and I cannot see that the play solicits the smallest sympathy for what this butcher and fiend have done. But Macbeth is not only a presentation of actions. To an extraordinary degree, even for Shakespeare, the world of the play is the cause and the result of the protagonist's mind. That world contains forces—divine grace and supernatural evil—that are not of Macbeth's mind yet cause that mind to be what it is. And Macbeth's mind, in turn, causes his world to be what it is, not only because of the impact of his crimes upon the world, but because the quality of that world is communicated to us as it is apprehended by Macbeth's mind. His subjective world becomes the world of our dramatic experience. Shakespeare has made us know what it is like to live within the associative, obsessed mind of a man like Macbeth, and we must, I think, admit that Macbeth's last great speech evaluates our knowledge of Macbeth's world accurately. Life in the world as Macbeth knows it signifies nothing.

We can, of course, take that knowledge to be the knowledge of an illusion. The play permits us to choose to believe that Macbeth's life is a tale told by an idiot only to Macbeth and only because Macbeth has willfully destroyed his ability to see the measure, time, and place that Malcolm and Macduff can see. But does the text insist that the subjective vision is illusion and the objective is reality? I do not think so. I have said that Macbeth should be apprehended simultaneously as the providential tragicomedy of a society and as the psychological tragedy of a villain protagonist. I have also maintained that there are at least four different and equally valid ways of understanding that protagonist. Two of these ways, by seeing the protagonist of the psychological tragedy as a creature without free will, call into doubt the meaningfulness of the providential pattern. And this, surely, is what Macbeth does at the end of the play by maintaining that he is a poor player in a tale told by an idiot. If he is without free will, then he is trapped in recorded time and his life signifies nothing. What the play shows us is that, experienced from within, by its victim and instrument, the providential pattern signifies nothing.

Notes

1 See R. H. West, The Invisible World, Athens, Ga., 1939, p. 29.
3 W. C. Curry, Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns, Baton Rouge, La., 1937, p. 48.
Charles Moseley (essay date 1988)


[In the essay that follows, Moseley examines the issue of free will versus predestination, arguing that Macbeth is free to choose whether to murder Duncan and free to choose repentance, but once these choices are made his fate becomes inevitable. The critic asserts that Macbeth is fully aware of what he is doing at every stage of his self-destructive progress.]

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!
All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!
All hail, Macbeth! that shalt be king hereafter!

The Witches' prophecies in I.3 are fulfilled to the letter. Macbeth, almost immediately Thane of Cawdor, is soon king. Banquo would indeed beget kings: James I, early in whose reign the play was written, was one of them. So was everything that happened to Macbeth inescapable? Did he ever have a chance? Faced with a masterful wife who twits him about his own manliness, Witches lying in wait in odd corners of the countryside, the motive of huge ambition, an ideal opportunity and a dagger conveniently at his belt, could he have resisted, avoided his fate and not killed Duncan? The question of Macbeth's freedom of will and action is central to the play. I shall suggest that not to see Macbeth as a free agent is to destroy any coherence and dignity the character might have.

But to begin with we need some discussion of terms to clear the undergrowth. First, free will and predestination. Predestination has usually been understood as man not being free to alter the future course of events and his own conduct in them, both of which being controlled by some higher power. Free will, on the other hand, means the capability of choosing, within the constraints of circumstances—among which are the results of the free will of other beings—between alternative courses of action and response. The opposition seems complete: if there is free will, there can be no predestination, for the outcome cannot be known in advance; if the outcome is determined in advance, goodbye free will. But in fact the mutual exclusion is only apparent.

The problem with the concept of predestination lies in the idea of time implied in the syllable 'pre-'. Some analogies may help to sort this out. For example, when we watch a play for the first time and do not know its plot, we cannot know in advance what the characters are going to do. When we see it again—and nothing in the play has changed—we know, as by definition the characters cannot, just what they will do: we can see their future, but they can't. The sequence of time in the play is present in our minds as a single completed whole. This of course allows the possibility of irony; but it does not and cannot mean the characters are predestined by us to behave as we know they will, for in their imaginary and illusory world they are still ignorant of the future, which for them at any given moment does not, strictly, yet exist. They are capable of acting and deciding as free beings, which is why we find them interesting. To put it another way: if we see a man sitting on a chair, he must be sitting on it. But his sitting on it is not controlled by our seeing him. In a similar way, in the sixth century, Boethius, in the Consolation of Philosophy, suggested the idea of predestination was simply a literal nonsense; God, who exists by definition in an Eternal Present, where there is no time, has knowledge of events in time but not foreknowledge of them, for all times are equidistant from him as all points on the circumference of a circle are equidistant from the central point of no dimension round which it is described. Thus it is possible to reconcile God's knowledge of all time, including the future, with the freedom of choice and action in time of human beings.

Macbeth could be seen as the puppet of forces external to the world of the play—the Witches, or the evil they represent, or of a malevolent Fate or a hostile Creator. But to do so would reduce him to the level of a doll...
without autonomy of action and choice; it would rob him of his dignity as a tragic hero. Our reaction could only be pity, and the play would be a statement, quite literally, of no meaning—no meaning in the suffering and grandeur of man, and because it would imply that all men are similarly so controlled, the statement would itself be predestined and therefore without any meaning that could logically be seen as true or false. But to see Macbeth as a free agent with real choices allows us to ask the much more interesting question of how Macbeth was trapped into becoming the willing agent of his own damnation. Before we can look at that damnation, it is necessary to glance at what type of play Macbeth is, and the nature of the Witches and what they represent.

*Macbeth* is a fundamentally religious play: that is, its main area of interest is in the struggle in a man's soul between good and evil courses, where the choice of good leads to his developing his full potential, and the choice of evil to his utter and complete loss of being and identity. It draws, indeed, for a good deal of its material on the religious drama, the Moralities and Mysteries, that were still being played in the towns of England well into Shakespeare's manhood. The Porter scene, for example, is built on and has verbal echoes of the comic scene in the play of *The Harrowing of Hell*, where the devil-porter hears a knocking on the gate and opens it—after much verbal slapstick—to let in Christ the redeemer who will destroy the power of hell for ever. (This gives us an interesting clue about Macduff.) Like other art of the time, the play presupposes a model of the order and degree of the universe that is the fruit of centuries of speculation by Christian philosophers, where every being has its allotted place and job to do, and sin consists, basically, in refusing to do it. But most importantly, like Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, it is a play about a man being tempted by appeals and suggestions to his overriding passion—in the cases of both Faustus and Macbeth, power—to his damnation. Shakespeare has clearly built Macbeth's motivation on an understanding of the nature of sin as defined, for example, in the work of the great theologian St Thomas Aquinas: the root cause of sin is the commitment of the self to a good which is changeable and imperfect, and every sinful act stems from an uncontrolled desire for some such good. Desire like this results from the fact that the sinner loves himself before all other things (the name for that is the Deadly Sin of Pride). Macbeth's inordinate ambition—of which he is fully conscious, (I.7.25ff)—makes murder a lesser evil than not enjoying the kingship. Furthermore, Macbeth's career closes with an insight into the terrible despair and aloneness that is how the theologians define hell—for, as Marlowe's Mephistophilis reminded Faustus, it is only imagery to talk of the fires of hell, for hell is a state and not a place: 'Why, this is Hell, nor am I out of it'. *Macbeth* is thus the spiritual tragedy of a man who rejects his honoured and virtuous place in the hierarchy of Scotland and of the universe through the coveting of the throne, and reduces himself to nothingness. He is a man, moreover, who assumes that the knowledge of the future the Witches seem to have leaves him no escape from his destiny.

Shakespeare's understanding of evil in this play is also built on sound theological footings. It is philosophically and logically a grave mistake, as St Augustine demonstrated in the early fifth century, to see evil as independent, self-existing, a rival army, as it were, to the hosts of heaven, that might eventually win. Unfortunately the imagery we have to use in order to be able to think at all about those things beyond human reason does tend to make us visualise evil as a power capable of action, just as the metaphor of the fires of hell has misled thousands into a phobia about toasting forks. Evil, rather, is a privation of good, an emptying, rather than a filling with something else. Its character is fundamentally negative. But on stage this philosophical nicety is very hard to represent—though we do see a gradual emptying from Macbeth of all those qualities that made him so admired by other characters at the play's opening, and Lady Macbeth prays for a quite literal emptying of her womanly qualities. Shakespeare's device of the Witches was a way of getting round this difficulty as well as appealing to popular taste and preconceptions.

Among the educated, there was an underlying scepticism about the powers supposedly deployed by witchcraft. Even James I was beginning to modify the credulous position he had expressed in his youthful work *Demonologie*. In some circles, indeed, the whole concept of an invisible angelic/demonic world was under some attack. But there was a good deal of popular belief in the power of witches to do nasty things to people, and the annual consumption of harmless old women being burnt as witches was quite high for a good part of the seventeenth century. On the stage there was a fashion for plays with witches and devils in them,
and though often the devils were comic (for Satan can't stand being laughed at) they were not taken without seriousness. The stage presence of Shakespeare's Witches combines something revolting and threatening with absurdity. The doggerel in which they speak emphasises the mindlessness of their malice—as for example towards the master of the Tiger; they represent in an externalised form the power in nature to turn to nothingness, away from true Good. The supernatural soliciting has no power of itself; they do not tell Macbeth to do anything, they do not control him in any way, they merely say what shall be and leave the chain of circumstance leading to it unsaid. Their prophecies could all come true—as does the first—without Macbeth doing anything at all except continue as 'noble Macbeth', 'Bellona's bridegroom'. He could even become king without doing anything—as he sees: 'If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me' (I.3.143). (He is a member of the royal family, and even the designation of Malcolm as heir, which he sees as a major blow to his hopes (I.4.49ff) does not preclude the possibility. Malcolm, heir to the throne or not, through entirely natural causes might well fail to live to enjoy the crown.) All the portents and prophecies of Macbeth's second interview (IV.1.47ff)—which is initiated not by the Witches but by Macbeth—have, ironically, a logical and natural explanation. The ambiguity of these second prophecies extends to the first; they 'palter in a double sense', and Macbeth ultimately recognises that it is his hopes that have made him take that sense in a way that has led to his destruction (V.6.56ff). Their power derives from their initial articulation of Macbeth's overmastering passion, the ambition he has already at least hinted at to Lady Macbeth (I.5.16ff), and from his wish, his 'burn[ing in] desire' (I.5.3) to believe, understand, and know in a certain way. It is not the Witches but Macbeth himself who allows the prophetic utterance to enslave his mind.1

Any power the Witches have is therefore parasitic upon Macbeth's own nature and ambition, and they externalise the deepest desires that he finds difficult to admit even to himself (I.3.136-137). Shakespeare is thus in a sense using them almost as a part of Macbeth's noble but flawed mind. A similar point is hinted at in V.3 and V.5: the Seyton (pronounced 'Satan') who arms Macbeth, and who tells him the news of the Queen's death that pushes him finally over the edge into despair, is an image of the real relationship between the Prince of Darkness and the moral being. The devil is powerless unless men give him power. The focus of the play thus centres in Macbeth's character, in the tragic mental and moral destruction and its effects. There was much theorising about tragedy in the sixteenth century which there is no space to go into here. What really concerns us is the consequent assumptions about the nature of the hero on which Shakespeare and his audience would be working. On a mature view a tragedy does not simply describe the fall of a man from high place to misery—which certainly happens to Macbeth, from 'noble Macbeth' to 'that dead butcher'—but also studies how he falls. His fall has to matter to us; we have to be convinced of his original grandeur, nobility and importance, see his fall as terrible and yet, because it proceeds from his own moral choice rather than merely from things done to him, ultimately just. And we have to feel a sense of terrible waste of human greatness and potential.

Both these premises, therefore, the religious and the dramatic, necessitate a Macbeth who is in a real sense free to choose. If he is not, he cannot be a viable hero of a tragedy; only if he is can the spiritual drama have any meaning.

As a tragic hero Macbeth has something in common with overreachers whose ambition brings about their downfall, like Marlowe's heroes Tamburlaine, Mortimer or Faustus—especially in their amoral pursuit of power. But he has more in common with a hero like Milton's Satan, where we see a being making an initial and entirely free wrong choice, and gradually being rendered less and less free by the consequences of that choice, to the point where he is unable to escape the prison of his own self. What is striking about Macbeth is the self-awareness he shows in his own self-destruction. He knows exactly what he is doing and is at all stages aware of his own progress. Moreover, his progress is highlighted by the important use of two foils to him, Banquo and Lady Macbeth.

Banquo and Macbeth start the play off pretty much on the same level. Both are valiant soldiers, dutiful subjects, the saviours of their country, equal in their deserving (I.4.29ff). But when the Witches appear on the
heath to both of them, their reactions begin to separate them, and it is worth illustrating how Banquo's
cautious detachment preserves him from the fatal lust to know what devours Macbeth's mind.

Ironically, we know from I.2.66ff, before the Witches appear, that the thaneship of Cawdor has been granted
(entirely understandably) to Macbeth. Their first prophecy is thus no prophecy, merely a statement of what is.
But Banquo and Macbeth do not know this; and Macbeth's 'rapt'reaction, conveyed by bodily gesture (I.3.50ff)'
. . . why do you start . . . ?') suggests that his interest has been passionately kindled and we are prepared for his
desire to know more (lines 69ff). He has already, without examination, taken the statements at face value, and
his desire to believe in the future greatness he covets means he is well and truly hooked:'The greatest is
behind'(line 116) is a clear hint of his passionate interest, and his eager turning to Banquo in the following
lines elicits Banquo's prophetic warning (an important signal to us that the play is deeply concerned with the
way Macbeth is motivated):'That trusted home/ Might yet enkindle you unto the crown'(lines 119-120). His
desire to talk of it more to Banquo (lines 153ff) confirms his acceptance of the reality and trustworthiness of
the experience, and it is only after he has murdered Duncan that he dissembles his interest (II.1.21) Banquo
receives a similar but apparently contradictory prophecy in I.3.61ff; he too desires to hear more—he is
understandably curious—but he is aware of the likelihood that the Witches are an illusion (lines 51-53),
mere 'bubbles'(lines 78-79). He recognises something devilish in them (line 106), and remembers, as Macbeth
forgets, that the 'instruments of darkness'can tell truth to make the soul trap itself—again, a useful guideline for
the audience about what to watch out for in Macbeth (line 120). Nevertheless, he is intrigued by them (II.
1.20) though he never loses his doubt about their status and reality—'If there come truth from them . . .'
(III.1.6ff). Like Banquo, the audience may be being asked to remain uncommitted to the final reality of the
Witches and the supernatural, but to recognise that the mind's consent to the illusion or whatever it is might
enkindle all sorts of terrible things. It is, after all, Macbeth alone who sees the Ghost in III.4, and whatever
else it is, it is one of the 'scorpions'of his mind.

The moral sense and caution shown by Banquo is constantly emphasised by Shakespeare to highlight the
freedom of choice both men enjoy. Careful of his honour, Banquo is guarded at Macbeth's tentative
suggestion that they should join forces:

So I lose none [honour]
In seeking to augment it, but still keep
My bosom franchised and allegiance clear,
I shall be counselled.

(II. 1.26-29)

He is clearly suspicious when Duncan is murdered, and declares his own position quite unambiguously
(II.3.127ff): 'In the great hand of God I stand'. The point is that he is tempted, he is attracted to the idea of
siring a race of kings, but he does not fall:

Merciful powers!
Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature
Gives way to in repose!

(II. 1.7-9)

Having one character who did not give way enormously heightens our perception of the one who did.

The Witches'prophecy is powerful only because Macbeth already has ambitions and desires that alarm him.
I.3.129ff shows that he wants to believe that he will be king, but he sees a terrible way to achieve it: murder.
He is aware that even thinking the thought—'murder yet is but fantastical'(line 138)—is dreadful (though
having the thought flash through the mind is not in itself sinful). It is consenting to it that revolts his whole physical frame, as the action itself will upset the very order of nature—a terrible yielding to that suggestion:

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature

(I.3.134-136)

Macbeth sees the appalling reversal of all values, of duty and nature implied in the action. And this time his conscience and his perception of the way the moral machine of the universe runs make him reject the notion of actively seeking the crown in this way; he rightly sees that he is not compelled to do anything (line 144).

Yet his desires, though 'black and deep', unfit for the eye of heaven to see, he does want accomplished. Clearly he has discussed them with Lady Macbeth at some point (I.7.48). She, indeed, has at this point no similar misgivings: there is no ambiguity about her when we first meet her. Indeed, Shakespeare had to develop her so rapidly as a foil to Macbeth's moral perplexity that in her first appearance she has to be clearly recognised as villainous. She is committed to the fulfilment of their joint ambition by any means. There is something utterly devilish in her rejection of all that is feminine in herself, something literally unnatural. Her terrible prayer (I.5.38ff) is fulfilled to the letter like all the prayers in this play are: she becomes a 'fiend-like queen'. But he is not willing to so commit himself—he reacts, 'We will speak further' (which is the polite formula for 'no') (I.5.69) to Lady Macbeth's clear assumption that he is eager to get on with the murder. She reacts with fury; but this is the last time we see her so confident. For as Macbeth grows in evil doing, she weakens. She needs Dutch courage before the murder of Duncan (II.2.1); she is agitated and nervous after it; by III.2.5-7 we are seeing the first crack in her, the first signs of the fear and insecurity that lead to her eventual madness. By V.1 she is in her own hell. The character whom Shakespeare presented to us at first as in many ways the simplest to understand is being shown to have a moral consciousness and awareness of her responsibility for her own actions.

By I.7.1ff the desire to be king is at the front of Macbeth's mind. He is even ready to murder to become so, but dreadfully afraid of consequences in this life and the next. He is aware that kingship won in such a way makes itself vulnerable to the very same breakdown in order and duty. He recites all the reasons why he should not murder Duncan (lines 12ff), and—in utter self-knowledge—he recognises that his ambition will, if not checked, ultimately destroy him (lines 25ff). (This concern for right conduct has been the means for him to be up till now 'noble Macbeth', and it is well known—and seen as a fault—by Lady Macbeth: I.5.16ff.) Sensibly, he determines to proceed no further in this business (lines 31ff), in recognition that what he would be doing would destroy his humanity (lines 45-47). But as a result of Lady Macbeth's persuasion by the unfair argument attacking his self-esteem, his courage, and his love for her, by lines 80ff he consents. He knows exactly what he is doing. The horror of what he is about to do that he shows in his soliloquy II.1.33ff does not stop him; and by II.2.20ff the horror at what he has done is compounded by the awareness that his bodily and spiritual rest is destroyed for ever. He needs blessing, but has (without repentance) cut himself off from it. The consciousness of his own guilt for his own action is overwhelming, and remorse (line 73) is almost insupportable.

His action has made him in a real sense unfree, for as he himself perceived, no action is without consequences. His life is now a series of responses to those that flow from this initial crime. First he has to dissemble. Yet in his dissembling when Duncan's death is discovered he speaks, with a hypocrisy which must be self-aware, a truth he echoes sincerely on Lady Macbeth's death:

Had I but died an hour before this chance
I had lived a blessèd time...
Fear makes him follow the first murder with two more, when he kills the guards to protect his own position; fear of Banquo, fear of the future—'To be thus is nothing;/ But to be safely thus'(III.1.47ff)—becomes the controlling emotion in his mind. Fear makes him mistrust his peers so that he keeps spies in their houses (III.4.130-131). He is quite aware of what is happening to him: he recognises that his 'eternal jewel', his soul, is now:

\[
\text{Given to the common enemy of man,}
\]

\[
\text{To make them kings, the seeds of Banquo kings!}
\]

And the reaction is not repentence, which can rescue the most hardened sinner, but defiance and despair:'come fate into the list/ And champion me to the utterance'(lines 70-71). All the time he is conscious of the 'bonds' on him (III.2.16ff) which alone keep him human, and in his despair rejects them. In the agonies of remorse, in the hellish snake-pit of his conscience—'full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife' (III.2.36)—he envies Duncan's peace. He knows what he is doing and what he is:

\[
\text{I am in blood}
\]

\[
\text{Stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more,}
\]

\[
\text{Returning were as tedious as go o'er.}
\]

The irony, which Shakespeare could count on his audience spotting, is that in his despair he forgets that true repentance can cleanse of the worst of sins. He has now truly lost his freedom, for he is trapped by his own mind in a hell of his own devising.

At this point he has overtaken Lady Macbeth in evil. He tells her to be innocent of the knowledge that he is planning to murder Banquo (III.2.45-46). When we see him meeting the murderers almost on their own level and persuading them, we are aware of the enormous lowering of status and dignity he has brought on himself (III.1.75ff). He has thrown all concern for anyone or anything except himself to the winds, and mere retention of power is all that matters. He decides to seek the Witches out to know/ By the worst means, the worst'(III.4.133-134) and in IV.1 he desires to know the future even if it entails the destruction of the world itself (lines 49ff; cf. lines 99ff).

By IV.1.149ff, when he vows to kill the Macduffs, his crimes have become merely vindictive, purposeless, vicious—and stupid. This cannot be to his advantage in any way. The violence is mindless, and even the nobility he had as a fighter at the opening of the play begins to dissipate in sheer bloodiness: the ugliness in V.3 of his nervous anger—supported by the significant oath'death of my soul'(line 16)—does not argue a great commander men willingly follow any more, and he knows that he is alone and must always be so: all the things he had at the beginning of the play he has lost. His life is fruitless, in the 'sere, the yellow leaf (lines 20ff). He has even lost the taste of fears'(V.5.9ff). His mind is now diseased as is Lady Macbeth's, and in V.3.40ff he is clearly talking about himself as well as her. Life has become meaningless,'signifying nothing'(V.5.18ff). He has finally become both the traitorous Cawdor and merciless Macdonwald, even to the composition of his army of kerns. The sense of waste and the terrible loss of something that was once grand and noble is profound.

Macbeth has been tricked by his own desires and ambition into projecting onto the ambiguity of the Witches'showings and speeches what he wanted to see and understand. He recognises at the end that the
fiends are 'juggling':

. . . palter[ing] with us in a double sense,
That keep the word of promise to our ear
And break it to our hope.

(V.6.59-61)

But by then it is too late; he is in hell, where the doors are firmly bolted—on the inside.

Notes

1 The motif of prophecy being fulfilled by attempts to avoid it—as in Oedipus Tyrannos—is common enough. Shakespeare is using the motif the other way round.

James L. o'Rourke (essay date 1993)


[Here, O'Rourke rejects the providential interpretation of Macbeth, claiming instead that the play depicts a world in which there is no rational sequence of motivation, action, and consequence, nor any restoration of order at the close. There is no accounting for the dramatic action, the critic argues, only an indifferent fatalism that subverts a Christian explanation of human existence.]

The persistence of the providential reading of Macbeth may be the best evidence for the continuing influence of A. C. Bradley on Shakespeare studies. Based on the introductions to Macbeth in standard classroom editions,1 Bradley's blend of metaphysical idealism and psychological realism which presents Macbeth as a drama about the purgation of the evil embodied in the figure of a murderer and the consequent restoration of a political and providential order is still the most common reading of the play presented to American students. This echoing of a Bradleyan line in Macbeth criticism would seem to have bypassed Harry Levin's attack, thirty years ago, on Bradley's approach to the tragedies. At that time, Levin characterized Bradley's metaphysical framework as an amalgam of Hegel and Aristotle,2 in which Bradley's usual description of a Shakespearean tragedy as a process leading from the temporary disruption of cosmic order to its restoration displaced the idea of catharsis from an account of the experience of a playgoer to a description of the world of the play. In this interpretation of Aristotle, the Poetics has become, as Stephen Booth puts it, "a sign of the covenant between literature and the ultimate values of the universe."3

Interpretations of Macbeth which have departed from Bradleyan beliefs about the "ultimate values of the universe" have nonetheless generally remained faithful to Bradley's emphasis on character and action as the primary vehicles of the conceptual framework of the play. Bernard McElroy and E. A. J. Honigmann focus on the character of Macbeth and stress his capacity for conscience and his consequent suffering; Wilbur Sanders and Harry Berger, Jr. go past the level of individual characters to describe Duncan's Scotland as a troubled society; and Karl F. Zender seems to offer a challenge to at least the more extreme views that Macbeth offers "an optimistic view of life" when he contends that Young Siward's death represents a shift from an ameliorative to a pessimistic conception of the significance of human struggle."4 But Zender reinscribes Young Siward's death within a Bradleyan universe when he frames it thus: "His death reminds us, in the midst of the triumph of natural and providential order, of its limitations" (425). This is consistent with Bradley's principle that tragedy depends upon a sense of "waste" within the structure of a cosmic order.5 Berger's and Sanders' critiques of Scottish society as depicted in Macbeth are not really, despite Berger's use of the word, "structuralist"; Berger has done more than what he calls "smok[ing] the edges of this structuralist approach
with an existentialist emphasis” when he describes *Macbeth* as expressing the "realistic view that history is largely the work and burden of man" (Berger 3), a conclusion that is far more traditionally humanist than it is structuralist.

There is not much about the witches in character and action criticism which seeks to assess the depth of Macbeth's character or his responsibility for his fate. A more truly structuralist analysis of the play that concentrates on the image of the witches in *Macbeth* is Peter Stallybrass's "Macbeth and Witchcraft," in which Stallybrass argues, I think justifiably, that the Weird Sisters of *Macbeth* embody all that stands in opposition to the political order not only of medieval Scotland but of Jacobean England. I agree entirely with Stallybrass that a reader should see as a "manoeuvre of power" the creation of a symbolic order which demonizes witches in order to justify a patriarchal polis, but I do not agree with Stallybrass that to see this is to disagree with Shakespeare. Stallybrass seems to believe that Shakespeare actually wrote the play that Bradley et al. describe, but that a modern reader should dissent from Shakespeare's conservatism. I would argue that in *Macbeth* Shakespeare wrote a play that is profoundly subversive of the Christian metaphysics that structured the symbolic order of his society. The subversion is in the poetry of *Macbeth*, and the pattern, as Paul de Man said of the structural intentionality of Derrida's reading of Rousseau, is too interesting not to be deliberate.

A shift from critical analysis of character and action to a concentration on the language of the play can bring about a markedly different view of the determining forces of *Macbeth*. At one level, the problem is put very well by L. C. Knights, who, although he advocated a providential reading of the play, showed exactly what has to be ignored to come to that conclusion when he said of the "sound and fury" speech that "the poetry is so fine that we are almost bullied into accepting an essential ambiguity in the final statement of the play." It seems an odd conception of poetic value to believe that "fine poetry" is to be resisted as one would a bully. But poetic language does not only figure as rhetorical persuasiveness in *Macbeth*; a post-structuralist conception of metaphor as the constitutive principle of metaphysics rather than as an ornament to meaning can demonstrate the close-knit integrity of the language of *Macbeth*, and can open up a reading of the play that goes beyond the quasi-naturalism of the Bradleian universe of tragedy which, as Levin so succinctly put it, "presupposed that man is both the master of his fate and an object of supervision on the part of the gods, to a much greater extent than either science or theodicy would encourage us to believe." The deconstruction of this providential view of *Macbeth*'s metaphysics has taken several forms in recent studies of the play. D. H. Fawkner, while avowing a Derridean approach to *Macbeth*, has simply flipped the metaphysical coin and discovered that the witches create a "hyperontological zone" in which "vanishing" is "structurally stronger than presence"; Stephen Booth and Marjorie Garber have found reasons to celebrate the play's undecidability; and Malcolm Evans has adopted the Derridean principle of supplementarity to insist that "if nothing is identifiable with sin and chaos, it is also the ground of all creation." But I would argue that all of these readings underestimate the centrality of the weird sisters to *Macbeth*. What the witches represent is precisely the opposite of undecidability; they are more than a simple principle of absence, and are even more than a supplement to the Creator of the Christian tradition. When Booth's especially close reading of the effects of iteration and wordplay in *Macbeth* leads him to the conclusion that "cause and effect do not work in *Macbeth, " he puts his finger on the metaphysic embodied by the weird sisters. If Stallybrass's observation that the weird sisters represent a challenge to the entire symbolic order of a traditional Western political system is pursued, then the stakes of Booth's observation become clear: the action of *Macbeth* is determined either by the Christian God who guarantees a traditional symbolic order and the Bradleian/Aristotelian covenant, or by the weird sisters who replace that Creator in the position of omniscience and represent an acausal determinism.

*Macbeth* clearly has much to say about Christian metaphysics, and specifically with the central paradox of a metaphysic which asserts both the omniscience of a divinity possessed of a simultaneous vision of all eternity and the free will of mortal beings who exist within that vision. In the economy of *Macbeth's* metaphysical speculations, the "sound and fury" speech subverts both halves of that Christian paradox, and comes to be far more than an eloquent expression of Macbeth's despair. The imagery of the speech draws together many of
the themes of the play's own subversive metaphysics, and the speech itself functions as an anagnorisis in which Macbeth crystallizes the terms of the conditions he addresses as "fate" or "time" in his asides and soliloquies throughout the play. A trope that anchors the metaphysics of the speech and of the play occurs in Macbeth's imagining of days stretching to "the last syllable of recorded time." The notion that time should end on a "syllable" supplants the Christian notion of the Last Judgment, as this "syllable" recalls, and provides a tightly logical completion to, the opening of the Gospel according to John which says that "In the beginning was the Worde." This wordplay about language completes a tropism which replaces the metaphysical governance of the word (logos) that gives order and purpose to the whole of creation with the prophecies of the witches, the "weyard sisters" who represent the blind determinism of Wyrd.

The subversive pun by which Wyrd supplants Worde anchors a metaphysics of linguistic determinacy that, in Macbeth, is a metaphysic devoid of allegorical reach—it "signifies nothing." The seemingly curious word choices which occur in the "sound and fury" speech are precise expressions of Macbeth's realization of the structure of this closed and meaningless determinism. When he responds to the news of Lady Macbeth's death by saying, "There would have been a time for such a word" (5.5.18), "word" does not mean only "message," and one underestimates the degree of Macbeth's fatalism if the line is paraphrased to mean that there would have been a better time for such news. There is an old English proverb about the operation of Wyrd which says "After word comes weird"—as the OED glosses it, "The mention of a thing is followed by its occurrence." When Macbeth refers to his wife's death as a "word" he collapses the distinction between "word" and "weird," the saying of a thing and the thing itself. The irony here is that Macbeth has, for most of the play, attempted to live under the naturalistic assumption that he could race against time. Eliminating the space between imagining and doing seemed to him the necessary means of his own success; he had sought to "trammel up" consequences and overtake time by making the "firstlings of [his] heart . . . The firstlings of [his] hand" (4.1.147-48). As he contemplates attacking Macduff's castle he says "be it thought and done" (149), but he echoes himself in a way that subverts his attempt to impose his own form of closure on history. His promise that "This deed I'll do" (154) unintentionally parodies his earlier assertion that "I have done the deed" (2.2.14), where the emphatic past participle expressed the wish that the murder of Duncan "Might be the be-all and the end-all—here" (1.7.5). When "I have done the deed" turns into "This deed I'll do," the iteration suggests an endlessly reopening chain of consequence.

In the "sound and fury" speech, time jeopardizes Macbeth not in its naturalistic speed but in its metaphysical scope; it "creeps in this petty pace," but comes relentlessly to the be-alls and end-alls of death and last syllable which end life and history. As Macbeth no longer sees any possibility of outracing time, the depth of his fatalism can be measured in the contrast between the flatness of the lines, "She should have died hereafter: / There would have been a time for such a word," and the eagerness which had informed his plans and desires to bring "Strange things . . . in head . . . to hand, / Which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd" (3.4.138-39), and "To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done . . . This deed I'll do, before the purpose cool" (4.1.149-54). By the time of the "sound and fury" speech, Macbeth is not inclined to think that there would have been a better time for Lady Macbeth to have died; he says, rather, that it doesn't really matter when an inevitability happens to occur. His collapse of "tomorrows" into "yesterdays" grounds his fatalism in a denial of the reality of "time" itself as it is seen within a mortal perspective, and his detachment depends upon his approximation to a perspective which is superior to temporality and is inhabited, in Macbeth, by the "weyard sisters." Lady Macbeth had defined the power of this perspective early in the play when she said that Macbeth's letters had transported her "beyond / This ignorant present" (1.5.56-57) until she felt "The future in the instant" (58). Seeing the "future" as the present is, in a Christian metaphysic, an attribute of God, who sees all time as simultaneous. The subversive metaphysics of Macbeth depersonifies this perspective which sees all time, all tomorrows and yesterdays, as simultaneous—that is, it removes the figure of "God," or the logos, from that position—but it does not without restoring freedom to human action. Even after replacing the figure of God with a trio of exaggeratedly fantastic figures that cannot inspire literal belief, Shakespeare binds all of the action of Macbeth to the vision of these figures. They do not cause events to occur, but neither can the action of the play be explained without reference to their prophecies. The most
seemingly commonsense interpretive questions, such as whether the witches are autonomous and cause Macbeth to murder Duncan, or if they are simply manifestations of Macbeth's unconscious, are made unanswerable by a play that does not operate within the assumptions about causality and temporality implicit in the questions. Such questions do not capture the mode of the "existence" of the Weyard Sisters, because these figures do not exist within the assumptions of a language which presumes causality. As Wyrd replaces Worde, the witches embody a literally nonexistent condition; what they represent defies the language, because it escapes the foundational categories of metaphysics of presence; "Wyrd," as Derrida says of "différance," is neither active nor passive, present nor absent, sensible nor intelligible.16

*Macbeth* thus engages the central problem of a Christian metaphysic, the conflict between divine omniscience and human free will, and emerges with the gloomiest of verdicts, as neither Divine Providence nor human volition can account for the action of the play. The idea of free will is dissipated in the failure of naturalistic questions to produce a causal chain that runs from motivation to action to consequence. The inadequacy of such questions shows through the prose of the foremost of Shakespeare's character-and-action interpreters when Bradley describes Macbeth's feelings at the murder of Duncan: "The deed is done in horror and without the faintest desire or sense of glory—done, one may almost say, as if it were an appalling duty; and, the instant it is finished, its futility is revealed to Macbeth as clearly as its vileness had been revealed beforehand."17 It was, however, the futility of the act which Macbeth had noted well before it took place. He wished that "th'assassination could trammel up the consequence," and "be the be-all and end-all here" (1.7.2-5), but he finally came to acknowledge the inevitability of retribution, saying:

> in these cases
> We still have judgment here; that we but teach
> Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
> To plague th'inventor: this even-handed justice
> Commends th'ingredients of our poisoned chalice
> To our own lips.

(1.7.7-11)

Macbeth says that he has no desire to kill Duncan ("I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent," [1.7.25-26]). He sees that the prophecies mean that there is no necessity for him to do anything in order to become king; when he says "If Chance will have me King, why, Chance may crown me, / Without my stir" just after the meeting with the Witches [1.3.143-44], this suggests that the prophecies, rather than inciting Macbeth towards the killing of Duncan, should have led him to view Malcolm's nomination as the royal heir with an equanimity born of the certainty of his own eventual accession. And he shows no sense of accomplishment even immediately after he has performed the murder: "Wake Duncan with thy knocking: I would thou couldst" (2.2.73) he says, only minutes afterwards.

Why, then, does Macbeth kill Duncan? Bradley's description of Macbeth's motivation toward the murder is that it is "as if . . . an appalling duty." It is, Bradley sees, more accurately described as a compulsion than as a decision, and Bradley's attempt at a quantification of what drives Macbeth to the act of regicide, that "neither his ambition nor yet the prophecy of the Witches would ever without the aid of Lady Macbeth have overcome . . . [Macbeth's] resistance"18 to the idea of killing Duncan will, to a modern ear, too easily recall "The woman gave me of the tree, and I did eat," to sound like a balanced assessment of blame. Macbeth's action is not entirely explicable in psychological terms, and the terms of any explanation are greatly complicated by the means of representation, in structure and language, of the murder itself. A significant feature of the representation of Duncan's murder is that it takes place offstage. This is a departure from the Shakespearean norm, and even from the norm in *Macbeth*, where Banquo, Macduff's son and Young Siward are murdered onstage, and Macduff exhibits the severed head of Macbeth. When this unseen murder is placed between Macbeth's wish that "I go, and it is done" (not "and I do it") and his emphatic assertion just after the killing
that "I have done the deed," where the rhetorical finality expresses his desire to send the deed to a safely completed, "trammelled up" past, the psychological dimension of the dramatic absence of the murder becomes clear; the play is representing Macbeth's avoidance of any thought of the act.

A thoroughly naturalistic vocabulary would offer, then, "repression" as the explanation for why Macbeth never discloses an adequate motivation for the killing of Duncan. One would say that Macbeth never allows himself to acknowledge that he has, of his own free will, committed this murder. But the imagery of the play suggests that there is something other than a personal unconscious below the level of autonomous will, and it uses the vehicle of dreams as the means of access to that world. When Macbeth contemplates the assassination of Duncan, he says "Stars, hide your fires! / Let not light see my black and deep desires" (1.4.50-51). This image of extinguished stars is recalled and given a domestic cast which counterpoints the impending horror of the murder when Banquo says to Fleance, "There's husbandry in heaven; / Their candles are all out" (2.7.4-5), but the imagery takes on a more ominous tone as Banquo goes on to say

A heavy summons lies like lead upon me,
And yet I would not sleep: merciful Powers,
Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature
Gives way to in repose!

(2.1.6-9)

He gives definition to these "cursed thoughts" moments later when he meets Macbeth and says, "I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters" (2.1.20). Macbeth, on his way to murder the sleeping Duncan, then sees the bloody dagger and draws the conclusion that

Now o'er the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's off rings . . .

(2.1.49-52)

This surreal "dream" world finally swallows Lady Macbeth; she had sought to live entirely on a naturalistic plane, only borrowing from the witches the expediency of a "fair is foul" morality. She ends, however, in a madness which cannot distinguish a "real" world from one of sleep and dreams. Macbeth's image of life as a player is a transformation of this experience of irreality. As he lives with the consequences of a murder which he consciously disavowed and then performed as if in absentia, his guilt is like that experienced in dreams: retribution is relentless and its means exceed the scale of realism (as Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane) but the actual transgression which inspires this retribution has only a shadowy, ambiguous existence. In Macbeth's metaphor, he is playing the role of the regicide, coping with the consequences of that "even-handed justice" which returns his "bloody instructions" upon himself, but he is no more responsible for the action of this world than the self in a dream, or an actor for the drama in which he exists.

The larger context, the unknown which is not comprehended by the individual "player," is a metaphysical order rather than a personal unconscious in Macbeth. In the "sound and fury" speech, Macbeth surrenders the naturalistic assumptions that had constituted his belief that time's challenge resided in its fleetness, and that his own success would depend upon overtaking events. He speaks of the two natural divisions in time as they appear to a mortal consciousness—a day and a life—and he imagines the larger frame of history, or "recorded time." Just as he sees that tomorrows end by becoming yesterdays, he describes life and history from their endpoints of "dusty death" and "last syllable." But any perception which is limited to temporal terms, even one running from first Worde to last syllable, is only ignorance in relation to the perspective of the weyard
sisters, who see that "tale" which tells all of history at the border where it meets the "nothing" that is an eternity beyond that last syllable. They themselves are only a literary device, a personification of such a perspective, and when Macbeth describes this perspective without personifying it, the place occupied by God in a Christian metaphysic is left empty. But the very possibility of an atemporal vision to which all time would be simultaneous abrogates causality and choice, and binds all human action to a single story.

Much of Macbeth is designed to give an audience the experience of living through such a predetermined tale. Macbeth's repeated professions of confidence in his own security "till Birnam wood come to Dunsinane" have the effect of assuring an audience that this realistically unlikely event will occur. The irony is intensified by the rapid alternation, in the later part of the play, of short scenes of Macbeth in Dunsinane with those of the forces attacking the castle; from both sides the references to Birnam and Dunsinane are so regular as to become almost incantatory. Angus, with the rebellious Scots, says of the English forces, "Near Birnam wood / Shall we well meet them" (5.2.5-6); Caithness informs him that "Great Dunsinane he [Macbeth] strongly fortifies" (12), and Lennox closes the scene by saying "Make we our march towards Birnam" (31). Macbeth then opens the following scene by saying

Bring me no more reports; let them fly all:
Till Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane
I cannot taint with fear

(5.3.2-3)

and closes it with "I will not be afraid of death and bane, / Till Birnam forest come to Dunsinane" (59-60). When Siward then asks at the outset of scene 4 "What wood is this before us?", the answer is entirely predictable: "The wood of Birnam" (3). The realistic rationale behind Malcolm's order to "Let every soldier hew him down a bough / And bear't before him" (5.4.4-5)—that this will disguise their numbers—has already been dispensed with; Macbeth has just been warned that there are ten thousand soldiers in the English force moving toward the castle (5.3.15.) The fact that Birnam wood will move toward Dunsinane is locked into place by the witches'prophecies, but its explanation in realistic terms is, dramatically, an afterthought.

Macbeth's expressions of confidence in his own security create a dramatic irony that Bradley refers to as a "Sophoclean irony," in which, as Bradley puts it, "a speaker is made to use words bearing to the audience, in addition to his own meaning, a further and ominous sense, hidden from himself and, usually, from the other persons on the stage."19 While broad structures of fore-shadowing such as that employed with Birnam wood make this kind of irony available to an audience seeing the play for the first time, a more detailed sense of such irony increases with an audience's familiarity with the story. Lady Macbeth's statement that "A little water clears us of this deed" takes its resonance, for a knowledgeable audience, from her later obsessive hand washing. The exchange between Macbeth and Banquo in which Macbeth urges him to "Fail not our feast" and Banquo promises "My Lord, I will not" (3.1.27-28) is grimly amusing to those who know that Banquo will keep this promise despite the impediment of having been slain in the meantime. The better an audience knows the story, the more capable they become of escaping the illusion of suspense in an "ignorant present" and approximating the perspective of the witches. The ability to see the playing out of a tale from which there is no possibility of deviation erodes any sense of morality; if there is no choice, there is no responsibility, and if there is no responsibility, there is no point to moral distinctions. As the sense of irony increases, partiality declines, and the foreshadowing of Banquo's death, although he is a "good" character, is more a source of black humor than of terror.

The play seems to begin and end happily, in each case with the victory of the "good" army, and its conclusion has encouraged traditional interpreters to overlook suggestions of cyclicity and to describe Macbeth as embodying a traditionally Christian story of the "temporary triumph of evil" but the ultimate restoration of "virtue and justice."20 But the characteristic wordplay of pun and echo in the play's final scene subverts the
optimistic interpretation of its events, and reinscribes the story of the dominion of Wyrd, in which, as the
witches say, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." To their unearthly perspective, at the border where the entire tale of
history drops into "nothing," all of history is a zero-sum game. This informs the detachment behind their
initial plan to meet again "when the battle's lost and won" (1.1.4). To them, since the entire story is zero-sum,
so are the individual events, or "words," and the play's language does much to reinforce this perspective. As
we enter one of the camps to which it does matter who wins the battle, the supposedly "good" camp, moral
distinctions seem nonetheless slippery. The first report of the battle is balanced, as the sergeant compares the
two armies to "two spent swimmers, that do cling together / And choke their art" (1.2.8-9). The first character
to be distinguished is "the merciless Macdonwald" (9), and this sounds like a condemnation, but then he is
called "worthy to be a rebel" (10), and the usually positive connotation of "worthy" suggests for a moment
that the sergeant may be praising Macdonwald for his valor. But then we find that "worthy" does not here
mean "commendable" but only "appropriate," for, the sergeant says, "to that [name of rebel!] / The
multiplying villainies of nature / Do swarm upon him" (10-12). His opposite is then named as "brave Macbeth
(well he deserves that name)" (16), but so was Macdonwald worthy of his name, and the distinction between
"brave" and "merciless" is difficult to maintain throughout the description of Macbeth's conduct on the
battlefield:

Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
Which smok'd with bloody execution,
Like Valour's minion, carv'd out his passage,
Till he fac'd the slave;
which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th'chops
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

(1.2.17-23)

Duncan complicates the matter even further when he uses that ambiguous word just applied to Macdonwald in
praise of Macbeth, saying, "O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!" (24). These words echo again in the
often-noted irony in which Duncan says of the executed traitor Cawdor, "There's no art / To find the mind's
construction in the face: / He was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust" (1.4.11-14), and then turns
to greet Macbeth; his words of greeting are "O worthiest cousin!" (14).

The ironic perspective invites us to compare Macbeth with a rebel, and, in this case, one who has just been
praised for the manner in which he faces death: first, because he repents his crimes ("frankly he confess'd his
treasons, / Implor'd your Highness'pardon, and set forth / A deep repentance" [1.4.5-7]), and secondly because
of his bravery, manifested in his ability to "throw away the dearest thing he ow'd / As'twere a careless trifle"
(10-11). When Macbeth comes to face his own death in the play's final scene, he expresses, first, remorse, and
then courage; he is at first reluctant to fight with Macduff because of having already shed too much of
Macduff's blood; he says "get thee back, my soul is too much charg'd / With blood of thine already" (5.7.5-6),
and then, after he learns of Macduff's unnatural birth and recognizes him as the inevitable agent of his own
death, he rejects the terms of surrender and accepts that inevitable death, saying:

I will not yield,
To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet,
And to be baited with the rabble's curse.
Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,
And thou oppos'd, being of no woman born,
Yet I will try the last: before my body
I throw my warlike shield: lay on, Macduff;
And damn'd be him that first cries, "Hold, enough!"
The subsequent valorization of Young Siward's courage in the play's closing scene serves further to blur the distinction between the forces of good and those of evil. The "good" characters attempt to enforce this distinction as they repeatedly refer to Macbeth in demonic terms just before his death. When young Siward confronts Macbeth, he says that he will not be afraid to hear his opponent's name "though thou cal'st thyself a hotter name / Than any is in hell" (5.7.6-7). Then, when told that he faces Macbeth, he says, "The devil himself could not pronounce a title / More hateful to mine ear" (8-9). Macduff calls Macbeth "Hellhound" (5.8.3) and bids him relinquish "the angel"—meaning a fallen angel, a devil—"whom thou still hast serv'd" (14). While Macduff is dueling with Macbeth offstage, the onstage action consists of young Siward's death being reported; the proof given that "like a man he died" (5.5.9) is that he "Had . . . his hurts before" (12). This is obviously the way in which Macbeth is dying even as they speak, and if the contrast between "Hell-hound" and "man" isn't pointed enough, Siward says that his son's wounds, gotten "on the front" (13) in battle prove him to be "God's soldier" (13) and that there could not be a "fairer death" (15).

The echo of "fair" in this phrase is the subtlest and most ominous reminder of the spirits to whom "fair is foul and foul is fair"; Siward's belief, that there could be "none fairer" than his son's death, recalls Macbeth's early line "So fair and foul a day I have not seen." Other jogs to the memory at the play's close are the "Hails" with which Malcolm is greeted, recalling the witches' greeting of Macbeth, and Malcolm's reiteration of his father's metaphor of planting, last used when Duncan thought that, having suppressed a rebellion, he had ushered in an era of peace and stability. These verbal repetitions are a device used in the early scenes of the play, where the characters repeat the witches' words (as, "When the battle's lost and won" comes back as "What he has lost, noble Macbeth has won," and "Fair is foul and foul is fair" returns as Macbeth's "So fair and foul a day I have not seen") and represent a determinism without temporal development or causality. The absurdity of a world governed by Wyrd, as is the dramatic universe of Macbeth, does not depend upon the degradation of reality into unassimilable pieces; when Macbeth finds his experience to be surreal, it is because it seems too much like the experience of an actor playing a part in a prescribed story, where the pieces fit together so perfectly that they form a matrix of absolute, and unalterable, interdependence. This sense of internal coherence is given substantive, auditory presence through the device of iteration, while the failure of the play to provide fully formed psychological or philosophical answers to the questions it generates about its own nature makes it impossible to explain the whole through contexts of signification which exist beyond its borders. In Macbeth's words, this world "signifies nothing" beyond itself.

The explanations that reside within the play's own verbal context do not depend on causality; the witches do not "cause" the characters to repeat their words, and neither do they "cause" Macbeth to think of killing Duncan or cause any of the later action of the play. The determinism of "after word comes weird" operates without causality, because its agent does not really exist; the weyard sisters remain a hypothetical, rather than a reified, personification of the perspective which transcends time and sees past, present and future as simultaneous. At the play's conclusion, the time is not truly free, though it may look so from within the "ignorant present." In truth, the concluding action of the play remains within the ironic command of the representatives of Wyrd. They had provided two prophecies, one that told of the accession of a tyrant and a second that seemed, since it told of his displacement, to promise a liberation. But interpreters who have agreed with Macduff that at the conclusion of the play "the time is free" have underestimated the ability of the weyard sisters to speak in a double sense. The witches have told a literal truth, but through it they have inspired in interpreters, as in Macbeth, a false hope. The fact that they foretold Macbeth's inability to perpetuate his line places even the final action of the play within their vision, and makes the victory of Malcolm's forces just another word in the playing out of the story that the Weyard Sisters, if they really existed, would know comes in the long run to nothing.

Notes


6 Peter Stallybrass, "Macbeth and Witchcraft," in John Russell Brown, ed., *Focus on "Macbeth"* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 189-210. Some recent un-Bradleyan studies of the symbolism of witchcraft in *Macbeth* are those of Dennis Biggins, "Sexuality, Witchcraft, and Violence in Macbeth, Shakespeare Studies* 8 (1975), pp. 255-77; Luisa Guj, "Macbeth and the Seeds of Time," *Shakespeare Studies* 18 (1986), pp. 175-89, and Harry Berger, Jr.'s "Text Against Performance in Macbeth." While Biggins and Guj never seriously challenge the assumed Christian framework of the play, Berger sees a critique of a Christian ideology that valorizes machismo as it demonizes women. While I find Berger's essay acute at the level of social critique, I do not see why it is necessary, as Berger argues, to dissociate that critique from Shakespeare or from the dramatic structure of the play. Even Berger seems to have accepted, at least implicitly, Bradley's contention that Shakespeare was uninterested in or incapable of thinking in metaphysical terms.


"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and that Word was God" (John 1:1, Geneva Bible, 1560).


I am presuming that "should" in this case means "would." This is a common locution in Shakespeare, which occurs at least eleven other times in Macbeth(2.3.2; 3.1.4; 3.1.5; 3.1.20; 3.6.19; 3.6.20; 4.2.61; 4.3.79; 4.3.82; 4.3.97; 5.3.62).


Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 297.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 281.

Kermode, introduction to Macbeth, p. 1307.

Susan Snyder (essay date 1994)

SOURCE: "Theology as Tragedy in Macbeth" in Christianity and Literature, Vol. 43, No. 3-4, Spring-Summer, 1994, pp. 289-300.

[In the following essay, Snyder explores the question of causality in Macbeth through a discussion of the biblical narrative of Hazael, who learns from the prophet Elisha that one day he will be king of Syria—and who subsequently murders the reigning monarch. The critic proposes that in both stories the effects of supernatural prophecies cannot be established, for free will and fate are so entangled in each narrative that neither can be seen as ultimately responsible for the tragic imperative that drives each man to regicide.]

Modern chronologies of Shakespeare's works generally place Macbeth directly after King Lear. The two tragedies may even have been written in the same year, 1606. They are nevertheless very different, in a way that can be turned to account in structuring a course in Shakespearean tragedy. Macbeth's moral clarity stands out against King Lear's flirtation with nihilism. Macbeth from this point of view is seen as still very much in the tragic mode, but moving in a quite opposite direction from the earlier tragedy. Such an approach is akin to that taken by Alexander Leggati with the romantic comedies. Leggatt finds each successive play in this series sharply diverging from the one before, "as though the later play was created by taking the major impulses behind its predecessor and throwing them into reverse" (221).

The contrast is workable. On the one hand, King Lear sets forth not only personal tragedies but a tragic universe. Some of the wholesale destruction is significant—Edmund is killed by the brother he wronged. But some of it is random—Cordelia dies by accident. In the Fool's giggling non-sequiturs and in other flashes of deflating comedy, meaning itself keeps breaking down in absurdity. Though characters constantly appeal to the gods who rule over men's affairs to deal justly and restore order, the gods revealed by the course of dramatic action are not like that. They are indifferent, or actively malevolent, or just nonexistent. The action of King Lear takes its characters to the limits of moral apprehension and then propels them beyond, into uncharted and perhaps unchartable terrain. Individuals may make new sense of their suffering lives, forgive
and be forgiven, rediscover the value of human community; in the great world, however, all order seems to crumble away, even the grim consequentiality of tragedy.

Possibly Lear's journey took Shakespeare too close to total chaos. In any case the play he wrote next seems to work in the opposite way, enclosing its personal tragedy in a universe that is not only morally comprehensible but even shares our ethical sympathies. When Macbeth kills his kinsman and guest in violation of his sacred "double trust," the natural world reacts violently with storms, earthquakes, unnatural behavior by animals. The sun, "as troubled with man's act" (II.iv.6), refuses to shine on the day following Duncan's murder—and for dramatic purposes darkness continues in Scotland until the usurper's reign comes to its violent end. To expel Macbeth and his wrongs, the natural world contorts its own laws: a dead man walks; a forest moves; a man exists who was not born of woman. When the tyrant is gone, the orderly processes that Duncan fostered—planting and growth, loyalty properly enacted and rewarded—can be renewed by Malcolm. The disintegration and chaos that Macbeth experiences inside this cosmic frame is peculiar to himself, and we understand it as the result of his own action, an action he recognized from the beginning as unambiguously evil. To do what he did, he had to suppress by force part of his own nature, what Lady Macbeth calls the "milk of human kindness" (I.v. 17), and separate himself as much as possible from his own criminal actions. When this violent, almost schizophrenic, repression leads him to nihilism and despair, his painful course makes sense psychologically and morally.

But this scheme, individual chaos enclosed in a larger moral order, is not the whole story about Macbeth. From a different perspective its moral frame appears troublingly unstable. Several years ago I team-taught, with a colleague from the Department of Religion, a course called "Tragedy and Theology." Our texts ranged from Sophocles to Fyodor Dostoevsky, from the Old English Genesis B to Carl Jung's Answer to Job. We focused on situations where divine justice was mysterious, where the ways of God to men seemed to call for a tragic understanding along with—or in place of—the traditional "justifying." We probed certain episodes in the Bible: the Fall of Adam and Eve with its curiously displaced responsibility; God's endorsement of Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's; the hardening of Pharaoh's heart while plagues rained down on Egypt; the God-initiated afflictions of Job. In this context Macbeth looked very different. Students who had grown accustomed to querying theodicies and become alert to problems in supernatural causality did not find Macbeth morally straightforward at all. And especially they asked, what about those Weird Sisters?

What about them, indeed? Where do they come from? Where do they go after they disappear from the action in Act IV? Why do they confront Macbeth with their prophecies? What is their place in the moral universe that the play seems to manifest? The Weird Sisters do not abide our question. They are unaccountable, in all senses: their nature is mysterious; their origins are inexplicable; they cannot be called to account (see OED 1a, b2). Most of all, their impact on the action is problematic. They know that Macbeth will be king. Does their foreknowledge make inevitable the action by which he achieves that state? Do they incite him, anyway, toward murdering Duncan by letting him know what the reward will be? Or do they merely spell out an end, leaving any decisions about the means to that end—active or passive—entirely to him? "If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me / Without my stir" (I.iii. 159-60).

The question of responsibility has, of course, been much canvassed in Macbeth criticism, especially the older studies. It is not my main concern here, and I do not propose to go over the pros and cons in detail. In trying to apportion reponsibility between the Macbeths and the Weird Sisters, it seems fair to say that the text does not place the blame entirely with either party. The witches do not compel or even urge Macbeth to his murderous course; but if they had not hailed him as future King of Scotland, he probably would not have killed the incumbent king. Between these extremes of black and white is a large grey area; and the grey, like the hell Lady Macbeth sees in her night visions, is murky.

In dramatic terms at least, the Weird Sisters have primacy as a malevolent agency. They open the play, and before we see Macbeth we hear of him from them, as the object of a plot already conceived. (The sense this
creates in a theatre audience, that they take the first initiative and not he, is reinforced by contrast when he
next meets them in Act IV. By then it is Macbeth, far gone in blood, who initiates the encounter and demands
that they tell him what will happen.) Returning to the play's beginning, in the second scene we hear of
Macbeth as a grimly effective captain of the King's forces, unseaming rebels from the nave to the chops. It is
this loyal soldier Macbeth who finally comes onstage in the third scene. And yet, as editors and critics are
fond of observing, his first line—"So foul and fair a day I have not seen"—echoes the "fair is foul" chant of
the opening scene and thus suggests that something in him has affinities with the witches before they even
meet. Or does it? Macbeth, after all, seems merely to be commenting on the bad weather in conjunction with
the good outcome of the battle.

Perhaps Macbeth echoes the witches'linguistic reversal of values because he already harbors an intention, or at
least a wish, that resonates with the prophecy they will give him—a wish to kill Duncan and take the crown
for himself. Later Lady Macbeth, in a rage at Macbeth's indecision, accuses him of wavering from some
earlier resolve:

    What beast was't, then,
    That made you break this enterprise to me?
    When you durst do it, then you were a man;

    And to be more than what you were, you would
    Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place
    Did then adhere, and yet you would make both.
    They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
    Does unmake you.

(I.vii.54-61)

She would have taken her baby from the breast and dashed its brains out, she says, "had I so sworn as you /
Have done to this" (I.vii.66-67).

When did he propose "the enterprise" (one of those chilling euphemisms by which Lady Macbeth makes
murder sound heroic)? Before the action of the play, as Coleridge thought (68-69)? In a scene that was cut
from the text we have, as John Dover Wilson thought (xxxiv-xxxvii)? In an unwritten scene meant to have
taken place some time after I.v, as Alwin Thaler supposed (89-91)? Or is she talking about the letter she read
onstage in I.v, sent by Macbeth to his "dearest partner of greatness"? Like the witches'prophecies that
prompted it, the letter told only of outcomes; but like her husband on hearing those prophecies, Lady Macbeth
in her mind leaped easily from desired end to murderous means—so easily that she might well think later, or
wish to think, that the letter actually talked of killing Duncan. Certainly, given the play as we have it, she is
exaggerating when she says that Macbeth swore to do it. (Unless Thaler is right about the "unwritten scene," but would Shakespeare have left such a significant exchange unwritten?) There may well have been some
predisposition on Macbeth's part to get rid of Duncan and take over the throne, but the play denies us any
clear assessment of his guilty intentions before the encounter with the Weird Sisters.

I have been using two titles interchangeably for the mysterious trio, "witches" and "Weird Sisters." They are
called witches in the stage directions, though not in the dialogue, and their appearance and activities are like
those described in contemporary works on witchcraft (Curry 53-54, 223-24). Seen as human witches, they are
fairly limited in power—allied with evil spirits, to be sure, but able only to abet the turn to evil in a fellow
human, not to bring it about. In the language of the play, though, they are "the Weird Sisters," a repeated title
that suggests actual control of events. And even in this area of their significance the murk descends again,
because the First Folio printers sometimes spell the word weyard and sometimes wayward. Should we see
them as versions of the Norns or Fates, or on a smaller scale as wayward, in the sense of "perverse" or
"perverting"? The adjective that should define them instead mystifies their nature, situates them somewhere between causative power and mere ill-intentioned speech.

However the witches' prophecy figures in directing Macbeth toward the murder of Duncan, its import as a message is straightforward. They say he will be king hereafter, and he does become king. The oracles they give when Macbeth returns for more knowledge in Act IV sound to him equally direct in meaning: he should beware of Macduff; none of woman born will harm him; he will not be vanquished till Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. But while the words, at least those of the second and third prophecies, confirm Macbeth's grasp on power, they encode alternative meanings that foretell his defeat. A baby that has to be taken from its mother's womb is not, properly speaking, "born." "Wood" may be understood as a fixed topographical designation, but it may also designate a substance that can be cut down and transported somewhere else. The Weird Sisters, as Macbeth will realize only later, use the slipperiness of language to foretell disaster in the guise of absolute security.4

Fiends, he calls them, when he finds out that Macduff was not "born" of woman, "fiends . . . / That palter with [him] in a double sense" (V.viii.23-24). But earlier, when the advance of Birnam Wood on Dunsinane showed that assurance to be false as well, he attacked the "equivocation of the fiend, / That lies like truth" (V.v.49-50). "Fiend," in the singular, reminds us that equivocation is the favored weapon of the capital-F Fiend himself, Satan. The first instance in human history of what Rebecca Bushneil has called "oracular silence"5 occurs in the primal words of temptation that caused the fall of our first parents. In the biblical narrative God warns Adam not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, "for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." But the serpent assures Eve, "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4-5). Like the Weird Sisters, the serpent gives three prophecies. All three will come true in some sense but not as the hearer imagines. "You will not die": no, not right away, but all life from this point will be shadowed by mortality, "a long day's dying" in the bleak phrase of Milton's fallen Adam in Paradise Lost (10.964). "Your eyes will be opened": yes, but the new awareness will be only of the body's shame and weakness. "You will be like God, knowing good and evil": yes, but this "knowing" entails subjection rather than mastery, apprehending evil by experience and good only in contrast with evil—and therefore not knowing like God at all. What Adam and Eve will know, to make use again of Milton's succinctness, is "good lost, and evil got" (9.1072).6

In the long view the witches may have their place in a moral universe. When the riddling prophecies eventually unfold their full meaning, they show us an organism purging itself of infected matter and regaining healthy equilibrium: Macbeth falls; Malcolm institutes good rule; Banquo's line will triumph.7 When in Paradise Lost the Archangel Michael foretells Christ's eventual redemption of man and the glory of his Second Coming, Milton's Adam too can see the place of temptation and transgression in a larger scheme of good:

O goodness infinite, goodness immense!
That all this good of evil shall produce,
And evil turn to good. . . .

Full of doubt I stand,
Whether I should repent me now of sin
By me done and occasioned, or rejoice
Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring.

(12.469-71, 473-76)

Yet if the long view can reveal sin and suffering as God's instruments in bringing about an eventual larger good, that does not cancel out the tragedy of the short view: the perspective of the single individual who must
act according to his limited human vision and take responsibility for the results.

The mystification of responsibility in Macbeth's story comes into clearer focus when that story is put in dialogue with one from the very repository of moral order in Shakespeare's culture, the Bible. In 2 Kings the account of Hazael, servant of the King of Syria, and Elisha, the man of God, similarly blurs the line between supernatural and human causality:

> Now Elisha came to Damascus. Ben-hadad the king of Syria was sick; and when it was told him, "The man of God has come here," the king said to Hazael, "Take a present with you and go to meet the man of God, and inquire of the Lord through him, saying,'Shall I recover from this sickness?'" So Hazael went to meet him, and took a present with him, all kinds of goods of Damascus, forty camel loads. When he came and stood before him, he said, "Your son Ben-hadad king of Syria has sent me to you, saying,'Shall I recover from this sickness?'" And Elisha said to him, "Go, say to him, 'You shall certainly recover'; but the Lord has shown me that he shall certainly die." And he fixed his gaze and stared at him, until he was ashamed. And the man of God wept. And Hazael said, "Why does my lord weep?" He answered, "Because I know the evil that you will do to the people of Israel; you will set on fire their fortresses, and you will slay their young men with the sword, and dash in pieces their little ones, and rip up their women with child." And Hazael said, "What is your servant, who is but a dog, that he should do this great thing?" Elisha answered, "The Lord has shown me that you are to be king over Syria." Then he departed from Elisha, and came to his master, who said to him, "What did Elisha say to you?" And he answered, "He told me that you would certainly recover." But on the morrow he took the coverlet and dipped it in water and spread it over his face, till he died. And Hazael became king in his stead. (8:7-15)

The short view here is murky indeed. The prophecy that prompts Hazael to murder his king comes not even from some Weird Sisters of mysterious origin but from God's own prophet. And along with this message for Hazael, God sends an assurance to Benhadad that will make the king feel falsely secure. Is God, through his prophet, engaging in entrapment? To give the dialogue I propose between Macbeth and the 2 Kings narrative some cultural common ground, it is useful to examine sixteenth-and seventeenth-century commentary on Hazael. Biblical scholarship around Shakespeare's time betrays some uneasiness over this passage. In the Hebrew, Hazael is to tell Ben-hadad "Living, thou shalt live," though God has shown Elisha that "dying, he shall die." The Geneva Bible translates the first part as "Thou shalt recover" but then takes pains to clarify in the margin: "Meaning that he shulde recouer of this disease." This does not take care of the whole difficulty, since Ben-hadad does not, in fact, have time to recover before Hazael kills him. The Bishops'Bible also gives "Thou shalt recover" with a similarly inadequate marginal explanation. The King James translators apparently saw the persistent problem even with the usual gloss and altered the passage to read, "Thou mayest certainly recover." That is, according to one later commentary, because the disease in itself was not mortal "he might have lived if no other thing had intervened" (my emphasis).8

Elisha's problematic prophecy to the sick king is at worst simply false, at best equivocal; it promises to Ben-hadad a safety that is totally illusory, as the Weird Sisters'equivocations did to Macbeth. The question of divine entrapment is even stickier. Did the prophet's double assurance, that the king would surely die and that his servant would be king of Syria, create in a previously blameless Hazael the will to murder Benhadad? The story's laconic brevity offers little help to commentators struggling to absolve God. But they make the most of verse 11, directly after Elisha privately foretells Ben-hadad's death: "And he fixed his gaze and stared at him, until he was ashamed." Hazael is ashamed under the prophet's scrutiny, they reason, because he already harbors a guilty desire to kill his master. Alas, like the hazy reference in Macbeth to some earlier resolve of the hero to take Duncan's crown by violence, the evidence here of Hazael's previous bent to crime is ambiguous. "He stared at him, until he was ashamed": the first "he" who stares is Elisha, but, while the second "he" could indeed be Hazael, revealing his sinful intentions, it might equally well still designate Elisha,
staring too long for politeness.\textsuperscript{9} Those who want to find Hazael already guilty in his heart must also account for his apparent shock and disbelief when Elisha describes the atrocities he will commit against Israel. Perhaps he is being hypocritical, or perhaps he lacks self-knowledge. One seventeenth-century commentator reflects, "It may be supposed that Hazael at this time did not think he should do such cruel acts: but no man knows the depth of his own corruption" (Downname L114v). Does this apply to the murder of Ben-hadad too? It was this act, as far as we know, that started Hazael on his bloody career, as Macbeth's murder of his own king led him into wholesale killing.\textsuperscript{10} We are back at the basic question for both Hazael and Macbeth: if both have the potential for corruption and are moved to actualize it by an authoritative prophecy, to what extent does the agency of that prophecy share with the human murderers responsibility for their crimes?

Beyond the murky short view, however, readers of the Bible see something larger, the great epic of God's dealings with his chosen people Israel. The wider context for these events is Israel's desertion of Yahweh to worship Baal, which began in the later years of Solomon's reign and took firmer hold under subsequent rulers of the two kingdoms. In the first book of Kings, the still small voice of the Lord has already given to his prophet Elijah three missions. He must call Elisha as his own successor, and he must anoint two rulers who will rain destruction on Israel for its apostasy—Jehu king of Israel, and Hazael king of Syria. "And him who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay; and him who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay" (1 Kings 19:15-17).

In the big picture, then, Hazael is the counterpart of Jehu, both instruments of divine chastisement. Their destructive acts receive their sanction from the "scourge of God" principle which shapes, in 2 Kings and elsewhere, prophecies of the Assyrian defeat of Israel and the Babylonian exile.\textsuperscript{11} Elijah in fact carries out only one of these three missions, casting his mantle on Elisha and implicitly leaving the other two tasks to this successor. But in the narratives that follow in 2 Kings, Jehu fits the pattern of God's scourge much better than Hazael. He is actually anointed by an emissary of Elisha, as Hazael is not. He is given divine orders to strike down Jezebel and the house of Ahab (2 Kings 9:1-10). And as he carries out his bloody program, which wipes out Ahab's entire family and purges the worshipers of Baal, Jehu directly invokes the divine word: Joram's body is placed on Naboth's vineyard in conscious fulfillment of Elijah's prophecy to Ahab, and when little is left of Jezebel's trampled body he recalls another of Elijah's prophecies, that dogs will eat her flesh.\textsuperscript{12} Nothing in Hazael's story indicates that he is aware of himself as a divine instrument, or that anyone else is. Jehu's inner motives in his carnage are not unmixed with greed and ambition, but the presentation makes it easy to keep his personal failings separate from his role as God's agent. Although he wiped out the worship of Baal, he kept on the golden-calf cult, and God deals with him accordingly. He says to Jehu, "Because you have done well in carrying out what is right in my eyes, and have done to the house of Ahab according to all that was in my heart, your sons of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel." On the other hand, the golden-calf lapse is punished with loss of territories (2 Kings 10:28-33).

Hazael's moral situation presents no such neat boundaries and distinctions. As a foreigner, not of Israel, he is of less interest to the narrator than Jehu, and we are told nothing of his motives. Was he already ill-disposed, waiting an opportunity to betray Ben-hadad? Or did the prophet's words give him a new goal, which he then went on to achieve by criminal means? Even if he can be understood in the long view as God's scourge,\textsuperscript{13} where does that leave the question of individual culpability? If God implants a goal in a man for His own larger purposes, can the man be said to choose his actions and thus to bear full responsibility? Hazael's story as set forth in 2 Kings, like Macbeth's, resists moral logic. If we understand it at all, it must be tragically, as a mysterious knot of fate and free will that cannot be disentangled. The seventeenth-century commentary I quoted above instructs us to understand Ben-hadad's murder on two levels at once: "The event was according to the murderer's intent and the Prophet's answer." Much virtue in "and." The commentators use a simple conjunction to glide over potential contradiction. In an earlier try they assert that Hazael must have already had an evil disposition, but they find that the prophecy "You are to be king over Syria" was necessary to move him to act on it: "This Sovereignty was it that not onely gave him the occasion, but also stirred him up to execute that cruelty" (Downname L114v).
This returns us once more to questions of motivation in Macbeth. What purpose do the Weird Sisters have for confronting the hero—or what is their masters' purpose, if they in fact have such masters? To these questions the play offers no answers. Even Macbeth's personal motives are mystified. In early soliloquies he explores at length the moral and political consequences of killing Duncan but not his reasons for doing so. Does he long to be king? Lady Macbeth says that he does, but what comes through in her speeches of I.v and I.vii is more her desire than his. Perhaps we should take it as self-evident that royal power and prestige are devoutly to be wished. Yet it is strange that, apart from one passing reference to "vaulting ambition" (I.vii.27), there is nothing in Macbeth's long soul-searchings about the sweet fruition of an earthly crown. He seems not so much consumed by desire as driven by some kind of obligation. Positive longings are oddly absent in him, as A. C. Bradley long ago observed: "The deed is done in horror and without the faintest desire or sense of glory,—done, one may almost say, as if it were an appalling duty" (358).

What duty? What obligation? Perhaps to be what he is meant to be, to fulfill his destiny. Macbeth does consider simply letting it happen to him ("If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me"). But his wife convinces him, by appealing to his manhood, to take the initiative. Not only will the promised crown render him more than what he was, but taking positive action to reach that crown will in itself make him "so much more the man" (I.vii.57-58). The laconic narrative of Hazael tells nothing of what he felt as he followed out his destined role, but it is clear enough that the prophecies Macbeth and Hazael encounter totally alter their sense of what they are, as if an enormous mountain had suddenly appeared on their internal landscapes. The mountain's very presence may be felt as an imperative, as Mount Everest challenges men like George Mallory to climb it "because it is there." Mallory died trying for the summit; Macbeth is lost because he reaches his summit. Hazael lacks his heroic stature but has a place with him nevertheless in a tragic theology.

Notes

1 All citations are from the New Folger Library edition of Macbeth. Most of the play's major scenes take place at night or look forward to night. Macbeth's early morning visit to the Weird Sisters is marked by stormy weather as well as the atmosphere created by the "secret, black, and midnight hags" themselves (IV.i.48). Significantly, only the one scene that takes place outside of Scotland, Malcolm and Macduff meeting in England, contains a possible reference to sunlight in the need to "seek out some desolate shade" (IV.iii.1).

2 I wish to record my debt in what follows to the students in this course, given at Swarthmore College in Spring 1978; and especially to my co-leader Patrick Henry, now director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, Collegeville, Minnesota. It was Dr. Henry who first called my attention to the biblical narrative of Hazael, discussed below.

3 "She might naturally take the words of the letter as indicating much more than they said; and then in her passionate contempt at his hesitation, and her passionate eagerness to overcome it, she might easily accuse him, doubtless with exaggeration, and probably with conscious exaggeration, of having actually proposed the murder" (Bradley 483).

4 Bushnell observes that "the language of the witches becomes duplicitous as the play progresses, in proportion to Macbeth's own irony and hypocrisy" (202).

5 "Although oracular communication looks like dialogue, . . . unlike the human speaker, the oracle will only state the facts, but not interpret the causes, mechanisms, and results of these circumstances" (Bushnell 197).

6 On the specific equivocation involved in "knowing good and evil," see Blackburn. Renaissance commentators on Genesis 3 such as Pareus and Pererius note the serpent's equivocating promises, usually citing Rupert of Deutz's De trinitate 3.8. In Willet's paraphrase they are likened to oracles: "The devil in every one of these points speaketh doubtfully, as he gaveth the oracles of Apollo, that every word which he
spake, might haue a double meaning: ye shall not die, that is, not presently the death of the bodie; though presently made subject to mortalitie: your eyes shall be opened, so they were to their confusion: knowing good and euill, not by a more excellent knowledge, but by miserable experience after their transgression" (D6r). Sir Thomas Browne uses Satan's temptations to demonstrate words with multiple meanings: "This fallacy is the first delusion Satan put upon Eve, and his whole tentation might be the same continued; so when he said, Yee shall not dye, that was in his equivocation, ye shall not incurre a present death, or a destruction immediatly ensuing your transgression. Your eyes shall be opened, that is, not to the enlargement of your knowledge, but discovery of your shame and proper confusion. You shall know good and evill, that is you shall have knowledge of good by its privation, but cognisance of evill by sense and visible experience. And the same fallacy or way of deceit so well succeeding in Paradise, hee continued in his Oracles through all the world" (24). George Hughes agrees that "the Tempter dealeth in equivocations with double words and senses" (D3r).

7 And perhaps indirectly even when first given. Stally-brass notes that, unlike the riddling speech that accompanies them, the apparitions the witches display (the armed head, the bloody child, the child crowned with a tree, and the line of kings) convey with increasing clarity an ultimate "good'dramatic fate." When "cursed witches prophesy the triumph of godly rule [a]t one level . . . this implies that even evil works providentially" (199).

8 These glosses on 2 Kings 8:10 appear in Downname L114r.

9 Coverdale sees both pronouns as referring to Elisha. So does Giovanni Diodati, who glosses "until he was ashamed" as "for a long time"—that is, Elisha was made ashamed by the continuation of his staring at Hazael (Cc3r).

Hazael's status under Ben-hadad is unclear in the biblical text but may be parallel to Macbeth's under Duncan. The Downname annotators find it likely that Ben-hadad would send on such a mission "the greatest in the kingdom next to himself and suggest that Hazael was commander of the king's armies. On Hazael's apparently easy ascent to the throne they remark, "It appears by this that none of the Syrians suspected this murder of their King, and therefore questioned not Hazael for it, but quietly suffered him to succeed in the throne, either because the King had no children, and Hazael was of kin to him; or because he was so powerfull as none durst oppose him, or so gracious with the people as they chose him" (L114r-v).

10 See especially 2 Kings 24:2-4 and Jeremiah 25:8-12 on Babylon as God's agent in punishing Judah: "Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, behold I will send for all the tribes of the north, says the Lord, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants. . . . This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity." Note that Babylon, though acting for God's purposes ("my servant"), does not escape punishment. Armstrong discusses the prophets' perception of God's hand in Israel's disasters as part of Yahweh's evolution from tribal war-god to the lord of all nations, chastising moral deficiencies in His people (Ch. 2).


13 This argument raises another sort of question, directed this time to the biblical chronicler: why did Yahweh need the usurping Hazael as His chastising instrument when Ben-hadad was already making war on Israel? The chronicler cannot do a perfect job of retrospectively rationalizing history.

14 My thinking on this subject has been clarified by a discussion with Professor Paul Yachnin of the University of British Columbia.
Works Cited


Macbeth (Vol. 44): Further Reading


An influential reading of *Macbeth* as a representation of male attempts to escape female domination. Adelman argues that the disappearance of female characters by the end of the play enacts a consolidation of masculine power as well as the male fantasy of achieving a
family without women.


Examines *Macbeth* as an example of Shakespeare's modification of Aristotelian premises concerning tragic catharsis. As the play progresses, Battenhouse contends, we become increasingly aware that Macbeth lacks a full understanding of the implications of his ambition; moreover, our pity and fear for him remind us of the desolation and despair awaiting all those who misuse their natural gifts.


Asserts that because Macbeth is the consciousness of the audience as well as the tragic protagonist, we have a greater sense of intimacy with him than with any other character in Shakespeare. Bayley contends that since we perceive the hero through his own mind and thus he is "the most normal, the most comprehensible of men."


An evaluation of the characterization and motivation of Macduff, together with an assessment of the implications of Freud's frequent comments about him. Benston concludes that Freud's commentary reveals his unconscious anxiety that the poet has a superior understanding of the mysteries of the human heart.


An analysis of *Macbeth* that asserts the value of textcentered readings of Shakespeare. In performance, Berger argues, the motif of gender conflict becomes part of the central opposition of good and evil, and women are presented as threats to social order, but in the play as script the reader sees that this notion is a male construct, fabricated to obscure masculine fears of being feminized.


Discusses a wide range of topics, including English attitudes toward Scotland in the late sixteenth-and early seventeenth-century; likely sources of the play; the associated themes of time, procreation, and royal succession; the Weird Sisters as determinants of the dramatic action; the play's complex variety of rhetorical styles; and the history of *Macbeth* in performance.


An overview of questions concerning the date, sources, and text of the play, its language and imagery, and its stage history. Brooke also offers an extended analysis of dramatic illusion in
Macbeth, explicating Shakespeare's use of illusion to reconcile natural and supernatural elements and to depict the ambiguous relation between credulity and knowledge.


Examines different rhetorical styles in the play that underscore both the complexity of Macbeth's character and his stature as a tragic hero. Bulman traces the alternation of two antithetical idioms—one appropriate to the epic ideal of the conqueror hero and the other to the chivalric ideal of the ethical hero—as well as the recurrent idiom of equivocation or paradox.


Analyzes the symbolic value of violence in Macbeth. When Macbeth progresses from sanctioned butchery on the battlefield to the murder of his enemies, Calderwood argues, Scotland becomes a diseased state; its only cure is purgation through the slaughter of a sacrificial victim: the mock king Macbeth. In the critic's estimation, Macbeth gains tragic stature through stoic acknowledgment of guilt and recognition of the self-destructive consequences of his actions.


A political reading of the play that emphasizes the relationship between violence and patriarchal authority. From Cohen's perspective, Macbeth demonstrates the patriarchal culture's dependence on—and celebration of—violence, but it also shows how seemingly limitless violence dissolves hierarchical and sexual differences and brings society to the brink of chaos.


Includes an extensive review of diverse critical approaches to the play—formal, linguistic, thematic, psychoanalytic and feminist, through character analysis, and in terms of historical circumstances or prevailing ideologies—with generous examples of each method. Coursen also provides a lengthy discussion of Macbeth's performance history, devotes a chapter to various thematic oppositions in the play, and summarizes the tragedy's sources and textual history.


 Discusses the ambiguous characterization of the protagonist, the depiction of Lady Macbeth, the role of the witches, the significance of the various apparitions, the topicality of the play, and its performance history.

Contends that *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's most profound analysis on the theme of the ambitious hero, and claims that more than coveting the throne for himself, Macbeth is driven to murder Duncan because the act represents the greatest challenge he has ever faced.


Proposes that the principal motif in the play is the conflict between masculine and feminine principles. In French's judgment, *Macbeth* dramatizes a world in which power and aggression are the supreme values, while compassion and nurturing are denigrated.


Combines psychoanalysis and mythology to interpret *Macbeth* as a play obsessively concerned with evoking what is forbidden—and then suppressing it. Garber maintains that gender anxiety is central to both the play and its protagonist.


Identifies specific dramatic strategies Shakespeare used to elicit the audience's pity for Macbeth. Gearin-Tosh argues that the protagonist's many soliloquies—which the critic looks at closely—bring us so close to him that we feel like his allies, even when we are revolted by his thoughts.


Explores the play as a representation of displaced sexuality. Greene declares that *Macbeth* questions traditional assumptions about male and female principles as it portrays a hero who attempts to use murder as a means of establishing his manliness and his sexual identity.


A historian's perspective on the tension among different political forms in *Macbeth*. Hawkins contends that the play alternately portrays a perversion of pre-feudal bonds based on blood and kinship, the ambiguous values of feudal political structures, and significant issues associated with the centralization of power in the monarch—including the legitimacy of rule, the right of resistance to tyranny, and the relationship between private and public morality.


Explicates Shakespeare's use of the nationalist interpretation of Scottish history, which views the union with England as the end of Scotland's golden age of heroes. Describing *Macbeth* as a "tragic romance," Turner traces Shakespeare's portrayal of the decline of the Scottish monarchy from Duncan, a king who fosters belief in the reciprocal indebtedness of sovereign and subjects, to Malcolm, whose self-righteous condemnation of Macbeth and suspicion of those around him demean his own sovereignty.

Provides a summary of psychoanalytic commentary on Macbeth in the first half of the twentieth century.


Regards Macbeth as a man crushed by unremitting mental agony and driven by fear to commit sin after sin until he suffers the loss of God's grace. Jorgenson traces the progress of Macbeth's spiritual deterioration to the point of despair, when he finds no meaning in his life on earth and no hope of personal redemption.


Discerns a ruinous conflict in Macbeth between principles and desires—between socialized attitudes on the one hand and individualistic behavior on the other. Macbeth is weak and impressionable, Margolies maintains, and when he loses social approval he also loses his sense of self.


Discusses the motif of unity and chaos as represented in both the world of the play and the character of its protagonist. In Renaissance cosmology, the ideal world is a reconciliation of antithetical elements, the critic explains, and this should be reflected in the harmony of oppositions within an individual; Macbeth's tragedy, McAlindon posits, stems from his inability to temper unlimited ambition with his innate appreciation of the bonds he shares with others.


Asserts that Macbeth is evil from the start of the play and that once he has murdered Duncan, redemption becomes impossible. Morris suggests that Shakespeare may be indebted to Dante for this portrait of absolute evil, as well as to church liturgy and medieval iconography for scenes that are reminiscent of the apocalyptic Day of Judgment.


An updated version of Muir's earlier introductions to the Arden edition of Macbeth. After addressing the issues of text, date, the Porter scene, and likely sources, Muir focuses on the principal characters, viewing Macbeth as a man whose excessive ambition inspires the murder of Duncan—though he would not have acted on this impulse, the critic contends, without his wife's persuasion.

Discusses *Macbeth* in terms of three likely sources: the sixteenth-century Scottish histories written by George Buchanan, Hector Boece, and John Major. Norbrook argues that many of the play's anomalies and contradictions can be traced to Shakespeare's revisionary treatment of these accounts, which are hostile to the concept of absolute monarchy and openly debate the question of hereditary versus elective sovereignty.


A psychoanalytic reading of the play that characterizes Macbeth as a man torn between conflicting impulses: greatness and rectitude. In Paris's judgment, Macbeth is driven to murder Duncan less by ambition than by anxiety over his wife's contempt and his own self-hatred.


Discusses the play as a depiction of the ascendancy of demonic forces in the soul of Macbeth and the kingdom of Scotland. Reed believes that Macbeth has a resolute moral nature, leading him to suffer torments of fear and guilt after he murders Duncan; he dehumanizes himself to escape his conscience, the critic maintains, and is ultimately defeated by agents of divine retribution.


Compares Duncan, Macbeth, and Malcolm in relation to Machiavellian precepts of effective leadership. Riebling declares that Malcolm is the most complete Machiavellian in the play, for he is willing to subordinate conventional rules of ethical conduct to the urgent needs of his troubled kingdom—and ensure his own political survival into the bargain.


A psychoanalytic study focusing on the motifs of time, procreation, and storytelling. Simon observes a pattern of irregular flow and sequence of dramatic time, thwarted and monstrous births, and distorted narratives that underscores the futility and meaninglessness of Macbeth's life.


Disputes the widely-held belief that *Macbeth* should be read as an endorsement of the absolute power and legitimacy of kings. While Sinfield grants that this ideology is one of the political motifs in the play, he calls particular attention to another: the political philosophy of George Buchanan, a Scottish historian who declared that sovereignty is an expression of the will of the people and thus they are free to depose a tyrant.

Employs a psychoanalytic approach to explore the implication of Macbeth's inherently equivocal nature. Focusing on the matrix of apparitions and illusions in the play, Willbern proposes that Shakespeare's complex representation of fantasy and dramatic reality mirrors the dynamic relation between unconscious and ordinary thought in the human psyche.

**Macbeth (Vol. 57): Introduction**

*Macbeth*

Most likely written in 1606 and based on Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577), *Macbeth* is one of Shakespeare's shortest plays. Many critics have speculated that Shakespeare compressed the action and time frames of the tragedy for increased dramatic shock. *Macbeth* has often been praised for its artistic coherence and the intense economy of its dramatic action, which is replete with vivid scenes of violence and treachery. Although many critics have remarked on the overwhelming nature of the violent action in the play, it has received almost universal acclaim as one of Shakespeare's most profound and mature visions of evil. Early critical scholarship of the play focused mainly on comparative analyses of *Macbeth* with traditional medieval morality plays, as well as Shakespeare's treatment of topical and political issues. Many of these analyses focused their attention on examining *Macbeth* as primarily a political play that focused on and was written expressly to commemorate the accession of James I to the throne of England. While interest in studying the play as a political allegory continues to interest critics, it is the contrast of opinions between critics who perceive Macbeth as a tragic hero and critics who see him merely as an evil and egotistical character that has evolved into one of the most enduring themes of modern critical scholarship regarding the play. Other areas of critical interest include the study of ethics, political ideology, and gender issues in the play, as well as psychological approaches to Macbeth’s character.

Many scholars suspect that some of the scenes in *Macbeth* were added and other scenes were modified by someone other than Shakespeare. David Lowenthal (1989) proposes that despite this possibility, all the disparate scenes combine to present a unified vision of human life. According to Lowenthal, Macduff and his family present a Christian contrast to Macbeth and the supernatural elements in the play, relying on natural order and God for their own preservation. In the end, the play divulges that the world is not the dark or unintelligible place it seems, and that although there are contrasts and evil in the world, the forces of good are more fundamental and lasting and eventually overcome the chaos to reestablish a coherent human existence. Joseph A. Bryant (1988) takes issue with critics who maintain that *Macbeth* is more of a melodrama or morality play than a tragedy due to Macbeth's wicked and malicious character. Bryant maintains that whether wicked or noble, “the epiphany that tragedy brings … is available to all alike … the unjust as well as the just.”

Much of the twentieth-century scholarship of *Macbeth* has focused on both the political ideology and ethical considerations of the play. In an essay discussing these issues, Alan Sinfield (1986) stresses that the play focuses on the distinction between violence that the state considers legitimate and violence that it considers evil. For example, Macbeth's victory over Duncan's enemies in the beginning of the play is violent, yet it is not considered evil because it is in the service of the prevailing power. However, Macbeth's later actions, especially Duncan's murder, represent evil because it disrupts established power. In England, at the time *Macbeth* was written, this would have been an extremely topical matter because of such contemporary events as the Essex rebellion in 1599 and the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, both of which had resulted in many years of state violence. Barbara Riebling (1991) also discusses *Macbeth* as a political play and feels that while most scholarship has focused on the contextual ideologies prevalent at the time it was written, it can also be read as a discourse in civic humanism. Riebling feels that in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare studies the consequences of misrule in a Machiavellian context rather than a Christian one. Therefore, though Duncan is a Christian ruler, it is his very Christianity that invites disaster in the Machiavellian world.
Recent scholarship has also increasingly focused on Shakespeare's depiction of women in his plays, and *Macbeth* has been central to this analysis for many scholars. Joost Daalder (1988) contends that although Shakespeare did not portray men more favorably than women, he did have a strong sense of which traits and actions were “male” and which were “female,” and believed that women should not attempt to cross over into the male domain. The critic points to Lady Macbeth’s attempt to adopt a male role and deny her womanhood, which proves disastrous and harms both herself and others. Similarly, William T. Liston (1989) maintains that the play presents a conflation of sex roles and gender, where, if men and women step outside their roles, they lose their humanity. In Liston’s opinion, it is the liberation from their defined roles which destroys both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. In contrast, Janet Adelman (1987) theorizes that *Macbeth* presents a powerful fantasy of escape from an absolute and destructive maternal power. According to Adelman, maternal power permeates the play via the figures of Lady Macbeth, the witches, and Macbeth’s relationship to both, and that his relationships to these women represent primitive fears about the loss of male identity and autonomy. Adelman stresses that the issue of male autonomy was a common thread in many other Shakespearean plays, including *King Lear* and *Henry IV*, and that *Macbeth* presents his most powerful introduction to the realm of maternal malevolence unleashed in the absence of paternal protection.

The level of violence and chaos that permeates the play has led to numerous psychological interpretations of the characters and action in *Macbeth*. Pierre Janton explores the theory that the fear of assuming manhood is Macbeth’s tragic flaw. The critic contends that it is this flaw that leads him to annihilate all the potential and virtual father figures in the play. Robert L. Reid (1992) proposes that the play is fundamentally concerned with showing the horrific consequences of a truly heroic spirit embracing evil. From Reid’s perspective, the three murders in the play denote the three stages of the evolution of evil in Macbeth’s psyche. According to Reid, Macbeth’s victims ultimately represent the human bonds he breaks, and his degeneration into evil is deliberately worked into the psychological and dramatic design of the play.

**Criticism: Overviews And General Studies: Joseph A. Bryant, Jr. (essay date 1987)**


*[In the following essay, originally delivered as a lecture in 1987, Bryant takes issue with critics who maintain that Macbeth is more of a melodrama or morality play than a tragedy.]*

For years the one tragedy that almost all Americans read, or at least encountered, was Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. High schools regularly included it in the curriculum for the senior year, perhaps preferring it to the other major tragedies of Shakespeare because of its brevity, its simple plot line, and its melodramatic appeal. Among professional critics, however, enthusiasm for the play has never been high. Robert P. Heilman in a 1966 essay, revealingly entitled “The Criminal as Tragic Hero,” set forth the principal reason for that.\(^1\) Tragedy, he argued, echoing centuries-old opinion, presents a “noble enterprise,” one of uncommon dignity and ethical sophistication, which fails, not because the protagonist is wicked or malicious but because he is afflicted by some recognizable human frailty that causes him or her to err. The reasoning has usually been that we who participate vicariously in that enterprise contemplate the protagonist’s downfall with pity and terror but in the process achieve emancipation from the crippling effects which those emotions normally produce.

This, according to Heilman, is where the problem with the play *Macbeth* lies. After Act II the hero is an habituated criminal who in the end is destined to meet an appropriate punishment. Thus we cannot comfortably participate with Macbeth throughout his enterprise. At some point after Act II moral revulsion compels us to detach ourselves from his action and sit in judgment on it; and at that point our sympathies necessarily shift from Macbeth to Macbeth’s victims. Even if we do not switch allegiances entirely, we look
thereafter at the spectacle as if it were a melodrama (the alternative, by the way, that Roman Polanski
exploited in his movie version) or at best a morality play. “This,” Heilman concluded, “is not the best that
tragedy can offer”; and in view of the ontological and ethical assumptions that most of us, knowingly or
unknowingly, have inherited from Greek philosophy and our Judaeo-Christian religion, we can hardly afford
to disagree. In any case, today's scholar-critics, presumably in an effort to redeem for tragedy Shakespeare's
most conspicuous hero-villains, have increasingly tended to look favorably on the view that Macbeth and his
spouse were demonically possessed and therefore to some extent themselves victims. Following a similar
line of reasoning, they have excused Hamlet for committing himself to an unholy and unethical vengeance by
arguing that he was misled by a demon disguised as his father's ghost. Such evasions as these may preserve
temporarily the principle that many modern readers mistakenly identify with tragedy, but they distort our
perception of Shakespeare's text and confirm the repudiation of tragic vision that began when our ancient
forebears abandoned Heraclitus in favor of Parmenides.

Genuine tragedy is a Western phenomenon, and since the time of Euripides it has been relatively rare. True
comedy is much more common; for comedy is the appropriate literary mode for expressing that view of the
universe which we in the West, whether Christian, Jew, or agnostic, seem to prefer. Most of the things that
have gone by the name of tragedy, at least from Seneca to Arthur Miller, have been pale substitutes,
sometimes more comic in essence than tragic: heroic plays, sentimental domestic fables, problem plays,
moralities, or melodramas. Had it not been for the haven provided by the novel during the past two centuries,
tragedy might have vanished altogether.

The seeds for genuine comedy and tragedy were both present in the perceptions of primitive man, who saw,
first, that some things in this world recur and, second, that some things do not. As hunter first and later as
agriculturalist he recognized that a regular recurrence of the seasons and their attendant phenomena was
necessary to his survival; and as time went on, he developed gestures designed to signify, support, and
perhaps even precipitate such recurrence. These gestures, we are told, hardened into ritual, and ritual gave rise
to literary forms as we know them, all celebrating in various fashions the happy mystery of recurrence and
renewal. The second perception of primitive man was less happy, since among the things that do not recur he
inescapably saw himself and his wife and children. Moreover in time it prompted the reflection that
annihilation is the destiny of all individuals in the universe, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral. In some
quarters of the globe, advancing mankind took that soberer perception and developed compelling expressions
of it in symbolic ritual and corresponding art forms. In others, including our own, the fear of individual death
prevailed over acceptance; and in these quarters men placed their faith, as I have already noted, in recurrence.
More important, they placed it in the dream of permanence that an uncritical faith in recurrence engenders.
The attitude we in the West call tragic appears whenever that faith, for whatever reason, ceases to be strong
enough to obscure the perception of irreversible change that our senses will never let us absolutely deny.

By the time of Plato, however, faith in permanence had come to seem almost unchallengeable. Change or flux
had become the mischievous illusion which human beings were enjoined to avoid either by exercising rational
discipline or by expressing their confidence in some remote god of permanence. After Plato, the Stoicism
which dominated much of Roman thought and then went on to achieve a second currency in Renaissance
humanism reaffirmed for generations of intellectuals the view that “the eternal course of the universe is
cyclical … [and] all change is imminent in [an unchanging] God.” Formal comedy automatically found
support in such views, as did political and ecclesiastical establishments; and so long as nothing happened to
shake popular confidence in the institutions that counseled people about eternal verities, writers who might be
inclined to explore alternative views could do little. The pragmatic Machiavelli was vilified soon after his
treatise on practical politics appeared, and the voice of a skeptical Montaigne went largely unheeded except
by a handful of intelligentsia.

Of the Shakespeare was surely one. Near the end of his last play, he put what was most likely his own
conviction about humanity's involvement in eternal change into the mouth of an aging and disillusioned but
still unembittered Prospero. The old gentleman, having just dismissed abruptly the spirits who had been performing a prenuptial masque for his daughter and her spouse-to-be, dismissed the young people's disappointment with an unforgettable speech:

(As I foretold you) were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air,
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself.
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And like this insubstantial pageant faded
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

(The Tempest, IV.1.148-58)\(^5\)

Heraclitus could not have put it better, but nothing could have been more inconsonant with the implications of the presumably formal comedy in which those words appeared. What Shakespeare had done in this play was to unite the two fundamental perceptions of primitive man in a single comprehensive view, thereby transcending the limitations of comedy and bringing that genre into harmony with the vision of his major tragedies, Hamlet, Lear, Othello, and Macbeth. In these masterpieces of midcareer he had emulated his predecessor Euripides by dramatizing for his countrymen situations which discredited their confidence in a stable universe, moral or otherwise, and made plain the reality of perpetual change for all but the most naive to see.

Changing attitudes rather than naiveté have tended to obscure Shakespeare's presentation of that perception in the play Macbeth. Obsessed by dreams of order, we resist the vision of flux that is fundamental to tragedy and, when confronted by a character like Macbeth, look for causes, external or internal, to explain the changes that time alone is responsible for bringing to him. Macbeth to Shakespeare's audiences was not necessarily the criminal that modern sensibility often makes him out to be. We in the twentieth century need to be reminded that seventeenth-century Englishmen—the presence of a Scottish Stuart on their throne notwithstanding—habitually thought of their cousins to the north as uncivilized barbarians and so were prepared to see Macbeth's savagery as an example of cultural labeling and not as evidence of latent criminality. They could not forget that James's mother was supposed to have conspired with her lover to dispatch James's father by means of a well-placed charge of gunpowder; and Sir Christopher Piggott, member of Parliament from Buckinghamshire, who made a public allusion to what he believed to be the general Scottish practice of removing sovereigns by assassination, spent time in the Tower for his indiscretion.\(^6\) Shakespeare in dealing with Scottish material tactfully dramatized a subject set six hundred years in the past, when most peoples in that part of the world, English as well as Scots, were to some extent barbaric, and assassination was fairly common as a mode of achieving succession. For all that, however, Shakespeare's Macbeth was a Scot and, in English eyes, behaved like one.

The attempt to salvage something of Macbeth's character by declaring him demonically possessed derives from a similar aversion to a view of the universe indifferent to our notions of order. It usually involves interpreting the women on the heath as either devils or the devils' agents and thus the primary motives for Macbeth's behavior—a view that Shakespeare's contemporaries might have considered questionable, to say the least. Shakespeare found the three hags in Holinshed, and his retention of them in the play may have been prompted in part by a wish to flatter the King. James, it is said, liked to trace his ancestry to the murdered Banquo, who, those same hags had promised, should be father to a line of kings. We note that Shakespeare included in Act IV a reference to Edward the Confessor's practice of touching for the scrofula, something James had revived, reportedly with fair success; and this royal sanction of what amounted to faith healing had
probably reinforced the popular belief, dubious but still prevalent, that James also believed in witches. Yet Holinshed himself never characterized the women as devils or witches. Initially he referred to them simply as “three women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of an elder world” and then, after explaining that no one at first took their prophecies seriously, went on to say:

Afterwards the common opinion was, that these women were either the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say; the goddesses of destiny, or else some nymphs or feiries, induced with knowledge or prophesie by their necromanticall science, because everie thing came to passe as they have spoken.

He referred to them once more, in passing, as “the three fairies or weird sisters”; but the important point is that Holinshed, who adapted the story from a source of his own (specifically the account by Hector Boece) avoided responsibility for saying that they were supernatural in any sense. He merely allowed “the common opinion was” that the hags were supernatural and let it stand that they were “three women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of an elder world.” Kenneth Muir, a current student of Shakespeare's sources, is willing to let it stand there too: and thus Muir joins the company of A. C. Bradley, who, regardless of what one may think of his criticism, was one of the closest readers Shakespeare has ever had. Bradley had written of these creatures:

The Witches … are not goddesses or fates, or, in any way whatever, supernatural beings. They are old women, poor and ragged, skinny and hideous, full of vulgar spite, occupied in killing their neighbours' swine or revenging themselves on sailors' wives who have refused them chestnuts. If Banquo considers their beards a proof that they are not women, that only shows his ignorance. … There is not a syllable in Macbeth to imply they are anything but women.

Bradley has more to say on this score, but this is the general drift of his argument. He notes that Shakespeare culled from books like Reginald Scot's enlightened The Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584) (writing today Scot probably would have called his book The Exposure of Witchcraft) popular notions that might serve as atmospheric enhancement, but he gave his hags no power to influence the action.

Ironically the one undeniably metaphysical detail in the play is probably not of Shakespeare's doing. This is the unexpected appearance of Hecate, the Greek goddess of sorcery and witchcraft, at two points in the play (III.v. and IV.i). Scholars, virtually without exception, agree that her language and meter are incompatible with the rest of the play; and, noting that the two songs she calls for appear in full in Thomas Middleton's The Witch (1614), assume that Middleton, who continued to write plays for the company after Shakespeare left it, was the interpolator. The point of interest here, however, is the probability that someone in Shakespeare's company recognized a need to provide supernatural reinforcement for three characters who otherwise would have come across to Jacobean audiences as they did later to A. C. Bradley: that is, as nothing more than skinny hags who fortuitously provided material for the superstitious minds of two ambitious Scottish warriors to feed upon. As Shakespeare originally wrote the play, Macbeth's initial encounter with those creatures was nothing more mysterious than encounters modern travellers have had in some third-world countries, where pathetic beggars still emerge from ditches or the underbrush to demand gifts in return for fortunes.

Thus the prophecies of Macbeth's hags were beggars' clichés, directed at the bounty of their famous hero, Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, who had crossed their path on his return to the King's palace, to hear that he was already Thane of Cawdor and would someday be king (I.iii.49-50). Their prophecy to the less well-known Banquo was also a cliché, second best perhaps but the best they could do under the circumstances (Macbeth having already received their prize promises). Like scavengers on battlefields the world over they were in a position to see things that would escape the notice of those preoccupied with fighting, and they could easily have known, as obviously Macbeth did not, of the defection and disgrace of the Thane of Cawdor. Hence,
they promised Macbeth a prize which, knowing of its availability, he might have reached for on his own initiative, without any prompting. As for the crown, Macbeth was now clearly the strong man in the realm, regardless of his title; and this realm, after all, was Scotland. Thus kingship for Scotsman Macbeth was not beyond the expectation of a trio of beggars any more than it was beyond the expectation of Macbeth himself.

With all his valor, strength, and accompanying ambition, however, Shakespeare's Macbeth, as we have already noted, was superstitious—to Englishmen, simply another predictable Scottish characteristic. He was prepared, as sophisticated Englishmen would not have been, to see signs of the supernatural in old hags with fortunes on their lips. As they begin to slip away, he bids them stay; and when minutes later word of Cawdor's treachery reaches him, he immediately thinks of the second prophecy (“the swelling act / Of the imperial theme”) and confidently expects confirmation of that as well. Admittedly he pauses momentarily to reflect, “If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir” (I.iii.143-44); but even here he is already assuming that some divine, or diabolical, intelligence has determined to make him King of Scotland. Thus when Duncan back in his comfortable palace at Forres names young Malcolm immediate heir to the throne, Macbeth automatically begins to think of ways to remove what he takes to be a patent impediment to destiny. Of course, destiny, as ambitious Macbeth is prone to understand it, has nothing to do with any of these events, though with his first assumption to the contrary, the possibility of a tragic action begins to emerge. Macbeth's real destiny is simply the combination of ambition, superstition, and a hand accustomed to letting blood, all of which have now coalesced to direct his course.

What we see in the first act of Shakespeare's Macbeth, in short, is the inchoate tragic hero, the man who suddenly is able to believe that he has reached through the mists of circumstance to touch the hard rock of reality and for the moment does not dream that he can err seriously in feeling his way forward along what he takes to be a reliable surface. Macbeth's epiphany will come when he realizes that his solid rock is only one more illusion, when he begins to understand that there is no hidden agenda for him, perhaps no such agenda for anyone, that nothing on earth is determined, that in the end crowns go either to the strong or to the lucky, and that killing, however glorious the cause, is never anything more or less than simple killing.

Some may argue that the later prophecies in the play must surely be meant to suggest that a supernatural design of some sort lies behind that joke that the three hags play upon the gullible Scot. Actually Shakespeare gives no hint of such a design. The apparitions that deliver the prophecies on Macbeth's second visit are, like the dagger and the Ghost of Banquo, seen only by Macbeth. Unlike the ghost in Hamlet they are not confirmed by a second viewer, and they tell him nothing that he could not have known already. He hardly needed witches to tell him to beware of Macduff, who even on the night of Duncan's Scottish style murder was clearly the one who would in time go after Macbeth. Unknown to him the second prophecy, that “none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth,” also points to Macduff; but it makes use of information that would have been common knowledge among old wives in the countryside. It is the kind of gossip that a warrior chieftain would not have been likely to recall even if he had ever possessed it. Thus Macbeth took a midwife's conundrum for prophecy and went on to swallow a third pseudo-prediction, the meaning of which should have been clear to anyone whose sense of strategy had not been beclouded by a morbid concern for signs and portents:

Macbeth shall never vanquish’d be until
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him.

(IV.i.92-94)

Dunsinane, supposedly an impregnable fortress built on the highest hill in the region, provided an elevation well above the tree line and thus gave the possessor an advantage over any enemy who might seek to approach. The obvious strategy for such an enemy was to take advantage of the resources of the wooded
flatlands below in precisely the way that even the inexperienced Malcolm thinks of and proceeds to implement with great success. Thus the wood moves, as it had to do, and Macbeth quickly falls before the superior forces of England, Northumberland, and such Scottish defectors as Macduff and Malcolm between them have managed to muster. In the end he is a victim of nothing more mysterious than a retribution that he himself has provoked in his repeated attempt to implement a force of destiny that exists only in his own superstitious (and Jacobean viewers might have added) Scottish mind.

Removing the possibility that the fate of Shakespeare's Macbeth is determined in some way should make it possible for most readers to consider the play a tragedy. The widespread objection about the protagonist's villainy will probably remain for those who find it difficult to see the play in its original context, but even that presents no real impediment. Aristotle expressed a preference for a hero who is “highly renowned and prosperous” and who, though not “eminently good and just,” meets his reversal because of some error or simple frailty rather than because of “vice or depravity”; but this should not be taken as evidence that the essence of tragedy resides in its ethical implications. Tragedy in the last analysis deals primarily with Western humanity's recurring need to be reassured that eventually a manifestation of universal order will somehow remove, at least for men of good will, the threat of indiscriminate annihilation. The characters that Shakespeare sets before us in his tragedies all seek in varying ways to satisfy that need. Like Samuel Beckett's clowns they tolerate the absurdity of their lives in the expectation that in time a Godot or his equivalent will appear and fit the pieces together; and the prelude to any enlightenment that Shakespeare may give them is the realization that the resolution they anticipate will never come—that, in fact, such a resolution may never have even been possible.

A character who experiences this dispiriting prelude and never goes beyond it is Lady Macbeth, who near the beginning of her last scene (V.i) declares chillingly, “Hell is murky!” Custom has often interpreted what follows as the presentation of a guilty soul morbidly contemplating its own damnation, but what Lady Macbeth is really contemplating is the involvement she shares with all humanity in the interminable process of existence, the Heraclitean flux, which simply goes on without reference to any pattern or plan that human beings may ascribe to it and like the rain in the Gospel (Matt. 5:45) affects just and unjust alike. The terror that makes chaos of her final moments is something she derives from her recognition that time is a continuum and refuses to divide into meaningful discrete units, a nightmare in which the dead king will never stop bleeding and the stained hand never return to sweetness, in which all the subsequent murderous activities can never, for her, entirely pass away, and in which friend Banquo and the innocent Lady Macduff must abide as perpetual memories, conditioning her every thought and action for the rest of her time on earth.

Macbeth, we may recall, contemplated briefly in Act I the possibility that a similar nightmare might be his, but he thrust the spectre of that aside to initiate a course which he hoped would enable him to escape into a future secure from the troubled past he was on the brink of creating for himself:

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If th' assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come.

(I.vii.1-7)

The expectation which temporarily deflects Macbeth's thinking at this point, as we later learn, consists of the "honor, love, obedience, and troops of friends" that he will wistfully speak of in Act V as blessings that have eluded him (V.iii.25). Here at the outset of his course he can easily imagine that such things as these are the normal consequence of the kingship that he thinks is destined to be his: once the crown is securely on his
head, he believes, he will be able to live indefinitely in his hard-won comedy, “jumping,” at least for the time being, the thought of death and whatever else may follow. To do Macbeth credit, one must acknowledge that he has also begun to contemplate the unsavory consequences of his intended action when Lady Macbeth intervenes to redirect him to the murder; but he never quite recognizes that taking the crown, by whatever means, must involve living for a time in the fear of his friend Banquo’s ambition, then, Banquo dead, in the fear of Banquo’s children, and thereafter in the fear of challenger after challenger, until at last he will have no choice but to accept the joyless, sleepless existence awaiting a death he has spent the best part of his life avoiding. When at last Macbeth begins to realize that this is what kingship really means, he will cry out in a weariness that approaches despair:

I am in blood
Stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o’er.

(III.iv.135-37)

What Macbeth wishes for desperately here at midcourse is a place to stop, and that is what he seeks and thinks he has found after his second visit to the old women.

Even at the beginning of Act V Macbeth still clings to his dream of a universe of absolutes inhabited by supernatural powers which can, and on occasion may, make those absolutes known. When told that his thanes have begun to defect, he reviews the latest prophecies for all within hearing concluding with the boast, “The mind I sway by, and the heart I bear, / Shall never sag with doubt, nor shake with fear” (V.iii.9-10). Yet the fear that Macbeth still cannot acknowledge has already stolen away any lingering taste of sweetness that life may have had for him. When an unidentifiable shriek within the castle proves to have signalled the death of his wife, that fear emerges in the twelve lines critics have sometimes read as marking the nadir from which Macbeth will recover triumphantly in his final moments:

She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word.
To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(V.v.17-28)

The nadir, however, is bedrock; and the fear that brings Macbeth to it becomes the agent of his salvation. The vision he confronts in these lines that have sometimes terrified western audiences is nothing more than the long view which for many people of older cultures is the beginning of wisdom. Macbeth has put his faith in a veil of dreams, partly his heritage and partly fabric of his own devising. What saves him when circumstances rip that veil from his eyes is his ability to resist averting his gaze from a world that makes no promises and gives no guarantees and to accept, in the last minutes of his life, that world at face value.

Two details in the play, one early and one late, prepare us to see the conclusion of Macbeth in this light. In Act I Shakespeare goes out of his way to have young Malcolm report the last moments of the first Thane of Cawdor, who, like Macbeth, had betrayed King Duncan and was to pay for that defection with his life:
Nothing in his life
Became him like the leaving it. He died
As one that had been studied in his death.
To throw away the dearest thing he ow'd,
As 'twere a careless trifle.

(Liv.7-11)

This is the model of spiritual courage which Macbeth, whose physical courage had already proved itself in his confrontation with the “merciless Macdonwald,” will eventually be called upon to emulate. In addition to courage, however, tragic stature will require also achievement of that indifferent death which negates anxiety and can come only as the result of seeing that the human life by which we set so much store has all the glitter and all the transitoriness of a bubble in a stream.

To reinforce this brief image of a tragic Cawdor Shakespeare in the closing moments of the play gives us a compelling reminder. In Act V, Scene vii, Macbeth meets young Siward, son of the Earl of Northumberland, exults that the boy was born of woman, and promptly kills him. Later, in Scene ix, after the battle is over and Macbeth has been killed, the old man receives the news that his son is among the slain. At first he seems incredulous. “Then is he dead?” he asks; and the answer comes from nobleman Ross, a steadfast opponent of tyranny: “Ay, and brought off the field. Your cause of sorrow / Must not be measur’d by his worth, for then / It hath no end.” “Had he his hurts before?” old Siward asks; and Ross's answer comes, “Ay, on the front.” “Why then,” says Siward, “God's soldier be he! / Had I as many sons as I have hairs, / I would not wish them to a fairer death. / And so, his knell is knoll’d.” Malcolm, still the callous youth, interrupts: “He’s worth more sorrow, / And that I’ll spend for him.” But Siward quietly continues, “he’s worth no more; / They say he parted well, and paid his score, / And so, God be with him!” Undoubtedly for Siward and Cawdor, as for Macbeth, the universe remains a mystery, and Macbeth's comprehension of it at the end, is still best characterized as “a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing,” words that the play never contradicts. The death that he has feared and avoided for so long has turned out to be nothing more than the dusty conclusion to what must eventually become, for all human beings, a wearisome parade of tomorrows. The question that remains for those of us who watch this spectacle is this: Can one ever hope to achieve, much less retain, something resembling dignity in a universe that requires us to live and act in the face of certain dissolution but gives no unequivocal signs of controlling deities or of moral or even natural law to provide meaning either for our lives as a whole or for the single activities within it?

Tragedy's answer to this question (and tragedy is not required to give more than an implicit answer) has always been a qualified affirmative. From the beginning it has enjoined its Western audiences to emulate those millions in the Eastern half of the world, to say nothing of humbler sentient creatures worldwide, and accept gracefully the dissolution that was never the nightmarish annihilation we imagine it to be but simply part of the necessary accommodation of all life to existence in an unlimited continuum. To paraphrase an American author of this century, it has advised us to touch vicariously the great death and learn that it is, after all, only the great death.

Moreover, tragedy continually reminds all who see or read that human beings, whether they know it or not, whether they be saints or sinners, monks with begging bowl or world conquerors, achieve meaning for their lives existentially. This is true, tragedy says, whether one takes sword in hand or simply bows to the inevitable. What matters is the exercise of the will. Thus Macbeth, rising to tragic stature moments before the avenging Macduff kills him, abandons his delusion about a providence that would determine his course—whether diabolical or divine is not important—and lays down his life in awareness, for him newly achieved, that no life is more than a passing incident in the cosmic process:

To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet
And to be baited with the rabble's curse.
Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,
And thou oppos'd, being of no woman born,
Yet I will try the last. Before my body
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,
And damn'd be him that first cries, "Hold, enough!"

(V.viii.27-34)

So saying, Macbeth stands as a knowledgeable human being, fully if only briefly master of his destiny because he has at last recognized the nature of that destiny and accepted it. In this gesture he joins not only Cawdor and young Siward but Hamlet before him and Cleopatra and Coriolanus, who will come after in the succession of Shakespeare's tragedies. We Westerners who tend to stand in fear and embarrassment before the prospect of dissolution in the indifferent universe that gave us our fragile identities may still ask whether this is the best that tragedy has to offer. One must answer that if it offered better, it would be less than tragedy. In any case, this is what all the best tragedies have offered since tragedy was first invented to enlighten, console, and strengthen human beings frustrated at the collapse of their attempts to maintain a spurious dream of immortality. For those of us who have been led to think of the good death of tragedy as being contingent upon the elevated status of the protagonist and the nobility of his enterprise, it may be at least mildly comforting to think that good death has never been a respecter of persons and that the epiphany that tragedy brings, in poetry and in life, is available to all alike, young and old, woman as well as man, the unjust as well as the just.

Notes
2. The best statement of this view is that by W. C. Curry, Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns, 2d ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 53-93.
5. Quotations from Shakespeare are from The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

Criticism: Overviews And General Studies: David Lowenthal (essay date 1989)


[In the following essay, Lowenthal examines the mysteries in Macbeth—including character reversals and questions of fact and motivation—and concludes that the play “mixes pessimism with a more fundamental
PRELIMINARY VIEW OF THE SUBJECT

In its date of composition, Macbeth falls about midway between Julius Caesar and The Tempest, and like them is known only from the First Folio. Its condition, however, seems not to be as good as theirs, or so say the editors, some of whom find it too short—it is one of the shortest of the plays—and suspect paring by hands other than Shakespeare's. All the editors are sure there have been additions by another hand in at least one or two scenes (see K. Muir's Arden edition, pp. xii-xiii, xxiii-xxxiii). Despite such scholarly uncertainties, Macbeth, along with Caesar, and some of the history plays, is popularly considered one of Shakespeare's most political plays, as well as one of his best. To Abraham Lincoln it was the best: “Nothing,” he said, “equals Macbeth.” How simple and moral is its story! Led on by the prophecy of witches, Macbeth and his Lady succeed in secretly murdering King Duncan and gaining Scotland's throne. Yet they never enjoy the happiness they anticipated from this cruel regicide. Macbeth becomes engrossed in a series of additional murders, one worse than the other, until opposition to him mounts. When Malcolm, Duncan's elder son, returns to Scotland at the head of an English army, he is joined by those suffering under Macbeth's tyrannies, and together they lay siege to his castle. Shortly afterward, Lady Macbeth commits suicide, and Macbeth himself dies in face-to-face combat with Macduff, leaving Malcolm as Scotland's next king.

This is the obvious dramatic action of the play, but there are also signs of a deeper philosophical subject. In a play better known for memorable lines or phrases than speeches, no doubt the most memorable speech is one of Macbeth's last, just after the queen's death. Launching into a very abstract reflection on life, with its endless and aimless “tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,” Macbeth cries:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

According to this “atheistic” speech, as it has been called, Macbeth finds that life itself, like a tale told by an idiot, is completely unintelligible. Now he could not mean by this simply that life has no moral plan or purpose, for he thinks of himself as deeply immoral, and might easily have concluded, from his wife's fate and his own imminent downfall, that injustice is always punished, that the world is indeed moral—which is the conclusion usually drawn by the audience. But Macbeth has something else in mind when he calls life a “tale told by an idiot,” something very radical, and going far beyond the atheism often attributed to him at this point. For an idiot cannot tell a tale: his words do not hang together, or, better, are not words at all, but only noises, only fury. When an idiot “speaks,” one noise follows another unpredictable, and so, Macbeth seems to think, is it with life. Life too has no connections among things, no intelligible sequences of cause and effect. What made Lady Macbeth sick? Why is she now dead? Why is he about to be overcome? Why have they both failed? Macbeth finds himself completely unable to explain this turn of events. To him it is simply unintelligible.

In fact, the play does contain a real and great puzzle of causality, for, knowing what Macbeth and Lady Macbeth were like when they planned Duncan's murder, could we have predicted their ultimate fate? No one has stated the problem better than Sigmund Freud, who found it inexplicable that, over so short a span of time, the remorseless Lady Macbeth should be suicidally “borne down” by remorse, while the fearful Macbeth ends up “all defiance.” Freud criticizes Shakespeare because he finds these apparent reversals of character unintelligible; quite rightly he refuses to allow the dramatist any leeway that “breaks the causal connection” (Macbeth Casebook, pp. 132, 136-37). If Freud is correct in his diagnosis, Shakespeare seems to have constructed an unintelligible play, almost as if to corroborate Macbeth's view of life's unintelligibility.
Freud may well be correct on one point: the changes Shakespeare depicts in his protagonists could not naturally have occurred over a brief span of time—certainly not if Freud has accurately gauged the time involved (he thinks it a mere matter of days). But it is possible Shakespeare has consciously sought a kind of compression in the play—that what by nature would take much longer he has caused to occur within not only a relatively short period of time but in a very small number of pages as well. If he could do this while providing the thread of intelligibility—of cause and effect in the seeming reversal of the main characters—better than Freud thinks he does, he will have engineered a special kind of dramatic shock, and a special goad to searching out these causes and effects, much as would a scientist or philosopher like Freud himself. The cause of Macbeth's oft-noted brevity would then lie not in paring by others but in Shakespeare's dramatic and philosophical intentions combined. If we can prove, further, that the scenes thought to be superfluously added by someone else are also intrinsic to Shakespeare's overall plan, the play will be completely freed from the kind of editorial censure it has received.

But there is more. What would life be like if it is not a “tale told by an idiot”? In what sense is life a “tale” or story at all? If it is a tale told by a non-idiot, a normal man, life must be intelligible and capable of being understood in terms of cause and effect. But does its being a tale suggest an overall purpose or meaning to life? Is life intelligible in the higher sense of being what reason or wisdom would choose? Is it conclusively moral, directed by a providential supreme power working for the just and the good and guaranteeing their triumph? Certainly this would be the case if the God Christians believe in ruled the world. Macbeth does have a number of minor characters who seem to be the very embodiment of Christian belief and conduct, and who trust in a universe where good inevitably triumphs over evil. Duncan (and earlier, his queen as well) is said to have been like that; at first Lady Macduff is, and also the English king, who miraculously cures men of a disease known as the Evil (IV, 3: 108-11, 146-60; IV, 2: 73-79). In fact, there is a strong element of this belief in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as well: Macbeth fears what will happen to him in the life to come, and knows he has lost his “eternal jewel”; Lady Macbeth, sleepwalking, thinks she is in hell. Yet the witches opening the play, and giving it its essential atmosphere, seem to personify evil rather than good, and it is they, rather than any invisible good God, that, by arranging Macbeth's doom, seem to triumph in the play.

Macbeth is a mystery play—like a mystery story or novel—in more ways than one, and not simply in the sense that all Shakespearean plays are mysteries. Beyond the mystery of its character reversals and of imposing elements like the witches, it is filled with mysteries of fact left to the reader's notice and investigation. To mention only the most prominent: to whom does Ross refer (toward the beginning) by the term “Bellona's bridegroom”? What makes Macbeth decide to slay the sleeping guards when he goes up to see the dead Duncan (since it was not part of his plan)? To whom does Banquo so insistently travel the day of Macbeth's banquet, and who is the third murderer involved in his slaying? Why does Ross turn up at Lady Macduff's castle shortly before her murder, and who sends the messenger to warn her? What brings Ross to England? These questions of fact and motivation are essential to the understanding of life—of human affairs—and we must not be willing to notice an unexplained gap in the sequence without trying to pursue it. We cannot remain satisfied with the chaotic surface of things, or with superficial and apparent motivations. In ways small as well as large, we are given incentives to observe and think, to search for cause and effect, and thus to confirm life's intelligibility in at least this sense. We are also given sufficient information to decide upon its intelligibility in the higher sense of rational or moral order.

THE WITCHES FROM BEGINNING TO END

More than any Shakespearean play that is neither English history nor Roman, Macbeth derives its content from historical narratives. It is amazing to find how much of the characters, and of their speech and action, Shakespeare drew from Holinshed's Chronicles and like sources. It is even more amazing, and instructive, to discover the changes he made, using certain features but not others, inventing new ones, and putting them all together in a manner conducive to his own purpose. The general outlines of the story of Macbeth are followed, but many of the details of Duncan's murder come from Donwald's earlier murder of King Duff. Various
witches and wizards are already in the story, waiting to be congealed into three witches, to whom Shakespeare, defiantly anachronistic, adds Hecate. Most of Macbeth is already there, and even Macduff. But Lady Macbeth had to be constructed out of a few lines referring to her ambition and her inciting Macbeth to murder Duncan. And while Ross and Lady Macduff are present in the story, their character and role had to be wholly invented. (See the Furness edition (Dover), pp. 379-95, and Shakespeare’s Holinshed (Dover), pp. 18-45.) Let us begin by examining those eerie yet contemptible witches.

The play opens with a brief appearance of the three witches and then a much longer one two scenes later. Their meeting with Hecate, so universally spurned by the editors, occurs at the end of Act III and the beginning of Act IV. There, after a reproving lecture from Hecate, the witches are directed to prepare for a final glorious deception of Macbeth, which all four then consummate together. The details of word and deed provided in all these scenes are more than “atmospherics,” though they certainly create a most particular atmosphere and mood. The reader is intended to think seriously about the witches: What kind of beings are they? Are they real? What is their significance? Who is Hecate, and why is she needed? In their very first lines, the witches show a predilection for bad weather (“thunder, lightning or in rain”), a taste for paradox (“when the battle’s lost and won”), and a gift of prophecy (knowing that the battle will be finished “ere the set of sun”). Their “fair is foul, and foul is fair” seems to reek of moral as well as meteorological paradox; their answering the call of little spirits (“I come, Graymalkin!” “Paddock calls”) propounds an equally perplexing metaphysical paradox—that of the greater being seeming to serve the lesser, like a pet owner his pet. And, of course, why they are intent on meeting Macbeth is never discussed or divulged.

When they have convened again a little later to meet Macbeth, the witches begin a rather lengthy conversation, asking each other what they had just been doing in the interim. They address each other as “sister,” indicating a kinship either of blood or kind, but they use no first names, and give the impression that they may lack such names, even though their petlike spirits have them. And since they must ask about each other’s doings, some drastic limits to their foreknowledge are indicated: perhaps it extends only to the doings of men, or to the things receiving their attention. Their answers are equally interesting. One has been killing swine—evidently an activity needing no further explanation. The other begs for chestnuts from a sailor’s wife, who interrupts her chewing only to dismiss the witch quite airily, fully aware she is a witch. Out of what looks like a desire for revenge, this one—knowing the wife’s husband is the master of a ship at sea—will pursue him in a sieve and “do” something to him. One thing she will clearly do is use the wind she commands, and the winds offered by her two sisters, to blow his ship about for “nine times nine” (that is, eighty-one) weeks, tossing it in a tempest, but unable to destroy it. Suddenly, she interrupts this train of thought to show her sister, childishly eager to see it, the thumb of a wrecked pilot. Hearing, then, a drum, they dance around three-times-three times to make up nine, and set the charm for Macbeth’s appearance before them, apparently not knowing, or caring, that Banquo will be with him.

What, so far, has Shakespeare told us with these witches? Remembering Macbeth’s later claim that “life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,” it cannot quite be said that the witches talk like idiots, since their conversation makes some sense. But it makes very little sense, and what strikes us most of all is their childishness, combined with a singular inclination to relish acts (or relics) of human harming, even while exhibiting kindness toward each other. We do not know what they look like yet, but they seem to have certain human needs (for example, the desire for food) and therefore bodies. They have command of the winds and can travel anywhere swiftly, but their powers of destruction seem oddly restricted—swine yes, but the master of the Tiger, no. The net impression overall remains one of unintelligibility and hence impossibility: their powers or traits seem inconsistent with each other. Above all, we do not perceive—nor would it be at all consistent with what we do perceive—any link between these witches and the devil. Satanically bent on evil, in defiance of God’s commands, these witches are not. There is nothing Christian about them.
What the witches look like we must wait to learn from Banquo, the first to see them. They are withered, wild
in their attire, female yet bearded, standing on the earth yet looking not like its “inhabitants.” They can
understand Banquo’s “Live you? or are you aught that man may question?” though by placing wrinkled
fingers on their thin lips they apparently signal him to remain silent. Only when Macbeth, both commanding
and asking, says “Speak, if you can. What are you?” do they break their own silence and give him the famous
“hails.” To Banquo they say nothing, but at his subsequent urging also address their hails to him, prophesying
his destiny, and making comparisons between it and Macbeth’s. With their final “Banquo and Macbeth, all
hail,” they refuse to answer Macbeth’s further questioning and disappear.

Why the witches seem originally concerned with Macbeth alone, and why they accede to Banquo’s demands,
cannot be known, nor even whether they anticipated those demands—which seems unlikely. The “hails” given
Macbeth mention three heights of place and power, two of them—the thanedoms—already achieved,
one—the kingdom—to be gotten in the future. Since we have just witnessed (in the previous scene) the
bestowal of Cawdor’s title on Macbeth, in his absence, by King Duncan, and learn from Macbeth himself that
he is already Thane of Glamis due to his father’s death, two-thirds of what the witches tell him are not
prophecies at all, though the power of the witches to know even these seems beyond any human power. Only
Macbeth’s becoming king can be considered a prophecy, which, as the story unfolds, turns out to be true. But
the “hails” to Macbeth contain utterly no reference to any evils he may encounter along the way, or to any
defects in his greatness. These emerge only with the prophecy given to Banquo, which is actually stated in
terms of comparison with Macbeth. Banquo will be lesser or greater, not so happy, yet much happier, a
begetter of kings but not a king himself. These too are largely confirmed by the further action of the play, but
the evil Banquo will encounter along the way—being murdered with twenty gashes in his head and thrown in
a ditch, all by command of his friend, Macbeth—could hardly be gathered directly from what the witches say.

At this point in the play, we have no idea whether it is the purpose of the witches to praise and please the great
humans they single out for their attention, or—as it turns out—to tempt them by the promise of great good
into actions that lead to a doom concealed from them. We have no idea whether the witches form part of a
large organized group or are out there uncoordinated, in unknown numbers, perhaps even working at
cross-purposes to each other, in a kind of chaos. To clarify the larger framework of their operations,
Shakespeare later arranges for them to meet with Hecate, in the scene (penultimate in Act III) that most
editors seem intent on extruding as spurious. Duncan has already been murdered and replaced by the
Macbeths. Banquo (but not his son, Fleance) has also been murdered, and Macbeth, still shuddering after
seeing Banquo’s ghost at the banquet, and anticipating his need for still further murders, has just declared his
intent to visit the “weird sisters.” He is “bent on knowing, by the worst means, the worst”—and this we only
learn indirectly when the visit takes place. He wants to learn what will happen to him now that he has again
waded, and will continue to wade, in blood.

When the witches meet Hecate, Macbeth has already indicated to Lady Macbeth his intent to visit him, and
Hecate is aware of it. The first witch has the first and last lines of the scene: all the rest are Hecate’s. Told by
the first witch that she looks angry, Hecate begins by explaining and justifying her anger, which is directed at
them. She takes command of their further operations, indicates her own general principle and the one
underlying their future strategy regarding Macbeth, and concludes by responding to the call of her “little
spirit.” Of these three parts of Hecate speech, the first has caused the most trouble:

Have I not reason, beldams as you are,
Saucy, and overbold? How did you dare
To trade and traffic with Macbeth,
In riddles, and affairs of death;
And I, the mistress of your charms,
The close contriver of all harms,
Was never call’d to bear my part,
Or show the glory of our art?
And, which is worse, all you have done
Hath been but for a wayward son,
Spiteful and wrathful; who, as others do,
Loves for his own ends, not for you.

An earlier American editor named W. A. Rolfe presented one of the strongest attacks on the authenticity of this scene. To begin with, Rolfe notes that Hecate speaks in iambics, whereas “the eight-syllable lines that Shakespeare puts into the mouth of supernatural beings are regularly trochaic.” Furthermore, in what sense could the witches have been said to “trade and traffic” with Macbeth, since no bargain or exchange has transpired between them? What were the “gains” in which they were all to share, according to Hecate (said a little later, at IV, 1:43)? And how has Macbeth proved a “wayward son, spiteful and wrathful”? These and similar considerations lead Rolfe to conclude that the part of Hecate is the work of some “hack writer in the theater” (Furness, pp. 232-33).

Rolfe’s criticisms are sensible, and deserve an adequate response. In accusing the witches of “trading” (“trafficking” emphasizes the same idea), Hecate seems to look upon their presentation to Macbeth as something like a rational exchange, where the trading partners both have in view an end or benefit to themselves. But the gravamen of her complaint comes in the next lines: You failed, Hecate says, to bring me into the action; I, who both control your charms and secretly contrive all harms; I, who alone can show the full “glory” of our art. In short, you set up shop on your own, so to speak, and were therefore “saucy, and overbold.” And the complaint has a second even stronger component, for, “which is worse,” you have done this for a “wayward,” not a loving or devoted “son,” who loves selfishly, “for his own ends” (but not different from others in this respect), rather than “for you.” In this part, the image of commerce or rational exchange is dropped, and replaced by that of love, with Hecate picturing the witches as Macbeth’s mother, who loves her son and expects both love and devotion from him. In both cases, Hecate seems, rather paradoxically, to presume that the witches are bestowing a benefit, not inflicting a harm, on Macbeth—a benefit they expect to result in some good to themselves, either in the form of a benefit rationally exchanged or one bestowed through love.

What can possibly be the reason for such complications? Shakespeare has Hecate call herself the “close contriver of all harms,” almost along the way, not unprudently, yet matter-of-factly. What she means is that all the harm—at least the human harm, and perhaps harm to all beings capable of being harmed—is under her control. Hecate is not Satan—she is very unlike Satan—but she affords Shakespeare something like a substitute for Satan through whom he can raise, more guardedly, the questions that ought to be directed at Satan himself. Satan had to be brought into existence to help explain the persistence, gravity, and frequent success (short of domination) of evil in a universe completely created by a good God. Since he could not create himself, he must have been created by God, as a good being that somehow manages to derange itself, thus leaving God without responsibility for evil. Satan must, to oppose God completely, represent evil loved for itself. Hecate demonstrates the impossibility of this idea. Once one postulates beings that bring evil into the world, and contrive all harms, they do so for the sake of either harming or benefiting. But a being that wants only to harm must want to harm itself, and such a being contradicts the very notion of being. Every being must therefore want to benefit at least itself. This is also why Hecate can later say to the witches, “O, well done! I commend your pains, and everyone shall share i’ the gains” (IV, 1:42-43)—leaving us wondering what possible gains they can obtain either from this successful performance before Macbeth or from his ultimate downfall. Will Macbeth become something like that wrecked “pilot’s thumb” the first witch carries around in her pocket? What needs of Hecate and the witches—and how must they be constructed to have such needs—are satisfied by the contriving of harm?

While Hecate may look “angerly,” and is clearly angered, it is surprising how little of the punitive or vindictive she manifests toward her “saucy” minions. On the contrary, all she asks is that they “make amends now” by following her directions. She plans a great display of their art, in all its glory, and is engrossed in the
thought of it—but not as a malevolent Satan, anticipating with joy the pain, suffering, and destruction to be brought about. Hecate is, above all, an artisan—or, better still, an artist who must create all the elements necessary to a successful charming of Macbeth. And the shortness, lightness, and rhyme of her lines are perfectly in keeping with this approach to her job as “chief contriver of harms.” We never learn whether there is a “chief contriver of benefits,” or by whom—other than themselves—the “glory of our art” is to be appreciated. Nevertheless, she gives the impression that bringing about harm is a difficult and complicated thing, and hence in need of a complex and glorious art. She is therefore characterized by something like the human love of excellence—an excellence which in her eyes remains untarnished because harms, presumably, are a necessary part of the nature of things. The witches seem to do, by impulse, what Hecate does out of a sense of rational necessity, and by art. They can therefore be pictured as childlike, she as a mature adult.

Yet Shakespeare wants us to see an essential kinship between them as well, and therefore makes her leave in response to the call of her “little spirit,” just as they had in the very first scene. Not only must one wonder how a devotion to harming is consistent with this love of pets, but also how the higher and greater being can seek to serve the lower. This touch is meant to draw even more sharply the contrast between Hecate and these witches, on the one hand, and Satan and his witches—viewed in the context of Christianity—on the other. Satan is all evil, from top to toe, but Hecate and her witches are peculiar combinations of good and evil, and hardly reek of malevolence in their evildoing. Their peculiarity provokes our interest not only in their motive for doing harm but in their motive for doing good. Is there a counterpart to Hecate responsible for causing good, and if so, what is the relation between the two? Or is evil subservient to good—somehow more difficult to bring about than good? Applied in the context of Christianity, what causes God to do good? What possible want or desire in Him could make Him create a world, and then suffer for one of His creatures?

Rolfe is quite right in his criticism of Hecate's speech, so long as one considers it a set of charges against the witches that, in a literal and simply factual sense, are either true or false. In this sense they are false, and seem entirely wide of the mark—hence the work of some hack writer. But the sheer poetry should have told him better than that, and if one thinks of Hecate's lines primarily as a vehicle for exposing the general problem of the relation between good and evil in the universe, Rolfe's objections disappear. That Shakespeare wants to confront this problem is shown, much more graphically than ever before, in the next witches' scene, set, as Hecate had told us, at the “pit of Acheron,” where Macbeth will soon come. Here we find the witches boiling in a cauldron a stew made of things that would utterly and instinctively repel the audience as evil: hideous animals that crawl and fly, run and swim, poisoned entrails, poisonous plants, parts of Jews, infidels, and the strangled offspring of prostitutes.

These ingredients are not selected in accordance with the strictest of principles, however. Some—like toads, snakes, bats, sharks—may be considered clearly repellent by nature, but others—Jews, Turks, and Tartars—only by divine law, or from a Christian point of view, and still others—poisoned entrails and prostitutes' strangled offspring—at least partly by human intervention. None are simply characteristic of a universe evil by nature or in itself. In fact, as if to remind us faintly of those parts of the universe that do not repel, or that even attract, Shakespeare has the witches include in their stew items of questionable repugnance, like “toe of frog” and “tongue of dog.” Later, as if to make sure the mood of the horrid is sustained, the witches throw into the cauldron the blood of a sow that has devoured her nine farrow, and grease from the noose of a murderer's gibbet, reminding us, with the last, of the most repellent spectacle in the play—that of the murderous Macbeth and Lady Macbeth themselves.

Macbeth insists on being answered by the witches concerning the future even if all things must be destroyed by the winds they command. But even before he can frame his question, the First Apparition knows how to answer it. The spectacle now presented to Macbeth—evidently Hecate's masterful contrivance—is in fact much more complicated than what the witches had originally presented on their own. In each of three cases, an unnamed and puzzling apparition explicitly tells him how to act, practically calling for injustice, and apparently promising him impunity. Finally, at his own insistence, he is given shattering confirmation of the
earlier prediction that Banquo's issue will reign in this kingdom, which leads him to call for this “pernicious hour” to “stand aye accursed in the calendar!” But Hecate has done her job well, and, true to her word, led him on “to his confusion” by assuring him security for his crimes. This she has done not through outright lies but through equivocation, using words that in their ordinary meaning give guarantees, while in some unusual meaning withdrawing them.

Toward the play's end, on discovering these extraordinary meanings, Macbeth senses the “equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth,” and exclaims against these “juggling fiends” that “palter with us in a double sense” (V, 5:50; V, 8:25-28). He ends up dead and headless, after the wife concerning whose destiny he had never inquired has already committed suicide. But his last meeting with the witches, at the pit of Acheron, concludes in their effort to cheer him up with music and dancing, as he stands distracted. Their spell is now complete, and its ultimate consequences guaranteed, without any necessity on their part to check later. Hecate and her helpers—beings whose function and good it is to do harm, without malice—must be satisfied with their success. And Shakespeare must have been satisfied with his. For by this point he has clearly distinguished the witches in Macbeth from Christian witches, and plainly entitled them to be headed by Hecate rather than Satan. At the same time, he has deepened our interest in the problem of evil in the universe. How is it to be accounted for? Why are so many things in nature repellent to man? Why is evil so important a feature of all human affairs? What causes evil in people like Macbeth and Lady Macbeth?

Clearly the perspective from which Shakespeare views these matters, in the play, is not Christian, although the protagonists are. With the help of his witches, Shakespeare can illuminate the problem of intelligible being (to help us decide whether life is a tale told by an idiot), using as a specimen case the nature of beings supposedly dedicated to the contrivance of harm. At the same time—allowing the witches to tempt men by promising security for injustice—Shakespeare can study, as if under artificial laboratory conditions, the rapid amplification and intensification of tyrannical evildoing, and the state of soul motivating and accompanying it. He will have recourse to important elements of Christian expectation—the porter as hell's gatekeeper, Lady Macbeth thinking hell murky—but only to show the natural hell, the hell on this earth, to which wickedness can lead. And he will have his little joke: a character named Seyton is suddenly introduced toward the end (and as suddenly disappears) to serve simultaneously as a bringer of bad news and Macbeth's assistant, in the process showing a supernatural ability that makes it impossible to identify him as a mere man (see M. Levith, What’s in Shakespeare's Names? pp. 20, 56).

GOOD PLAN, BAD PLAN

We must now turn to two bold plans of which we learn early in the play. The Macbeths' plan to murder Duncan, while paraded before our eyes, is poorly planned and executed, but successful. On the other hand, Duncan's plan to frustrate Macbeth's ambition is almost invisible, well planned, and well executed—but unsuccessful. We must begin with Duncan's plan, since it shows itself almost at once, in Act 1, scene 2. Duncan has always struck the careless reader as even less capable of forethought than King Lear, who had at least constructed a plan for the succession in Britain. Duncan seems old, weak, impetuous, too trusting, and too ready to distrust. We first see him in the midst of a combined revolt and invasion, relying not on his own efforts in battle but on Macbeth, Banquo, and his older son, Malcolm. Looks can be deceiving, however, for Duncan's support among the thanes is amazingly solid: only Cawdor has joined the rebel, Macdonwald. The chief problem facing Duncan, once we put all the facts together, has to do not with the invasion or the rebellion, as might first appear, but with the succession. Scotland was not then a strict hereditary monarchy, and, with its feudal aristocracy, obviously needed a mature soldier at its helm. Not only was Malcolm young for this task, but his military ineptitude has just shown itself for all to see: only the efforts of the bleeding sergeant keep him from being captured in this battle. At the same time, the sergeant's story testifies to the unrivaled military prowess of Macbeth, who proves himself to be the kingdom's salvation against the rebels.
This predicament accounts for a series of apparently disparate actions on Duncan's part that, taken together, display the coherence of a plan—and a good plan. Duncan had not yet made his son Malcolm the Prince of Cumberland—that is, he had not yet publicly made him his heir. Since hereditary succession (as shown by this very fact) was still not automatic, the king had perhaps delayed to keep from seeming selfish for his family and insufficiently devoted to the public good, hoping for some impressive military accomplishment from Malcolm that might justify his choice. But the king's own advanced age, Malcolm's youthfulness and incapacity as a soldier, and Macbeth's recent successes on the battlefield make Macbeth rather than Malcolm the all but irresistible choice for the throne. In these circumstances, what can Duncan do, and do instantly? We do not know for sure whether Duncan, like Macduff and others we learn about later, was already suspicious of Macbeth's moral character (for example, Macduff at II, 4: 88, Banquo at I, 3: 121-24 and III, 1: 1-3; even Banquo's prospective murderers at III, 1: 76-79). It is quite likely that he was, or he may have simply favored his own sons. In any case, he must quickly proclaim Malcolm Prince of Cumberland, and thus his heir, but in such a way as to prevent violent dissidence and opposition from Macbeth.

Already Duncan had tried to dilute Macbeth's influence by the unusual step of making him and Banquo co-captains in the war: we can see this motive in his question, after hearing of Macbeth's prowess alone, as to what effect the entrance of the Norwegian force into battle had on “our captains, Macbeth and Banquo”—thus bringing Banquo to the center of attention along with Macbeth. But the presumed treason of the thane of Cawdor gives Duncan a new and much more substantial opportunity, for Macbeth can instantly be invested with his title and lands just at the time the announcement about Malcolm is made. It strikes the reader as most precipitate on Duncan's part to call for Cawdor's death, especially on a mere verbal report of his treason by Ross. But the action had to be calculated, and Duncan speaks truly—of himself if not of Cawdor—when he says, “There’s no art to find the mind's construction in the face.” His plan, as we must reconstruct it, is to make Macbeth obligated and grateful to him publicly—to double his thanedom—at the very moment that his own son, Malcolm, is openly and legally set in line for the throne.

These conjectures can be confirmed by scrutinizing the events immediately surrounding Duncan's proclamation of the succession in scene 4. He has already sent Ross and Angus to greet Macbeth, on the way to Forres, where the king is staying, with the title “thane of Cawdor.” When Macbeth enters, the king calls him “O worthiest cousin,” thus indicating a family kinship later confirmed by Macbeth himself, and of course all the more dangerous in light of the succession problem. Duncan then talks of how much he owes Macbeth, without going into details, and ends with “More is thy due than more than all can pay.” Notice no mention yet of the title of Cawdor, amid large but vague promises of reward. Macbeth responds dutifully, expressing—to excess, it seems—the obligations generally owed not only to Duncan's “throne and state” and his children but to his servants as well! “Welcome hither!” responds Duncan. “I have begun to plant thee, and will labour to make thee full of growing.” Again, large but vague promises, this time permitting the inference that until then he has not “planted” Macbeth. In short, Macbeth—and we can understand why—had not been one of his favorites hitherto.

Then Duncan addresses Banquo as of equal deserving, and he embraces him, leading the reader to wonder whether anything he had just said to Macbeth indicated an embrace for him as well. By this point Duncan seems to have tears of joy in his eyes. Suddenly, without warning, he launches into the announcement naming Malcolm Prince of Cumberland and heir to his estate and, without saying so explicitly, his throne. The nobility of others shall also be honored. Then, with suddenness again, and striking brevity: “From hence to Inverness.” What this means is that he has just invited himself to Macbeth's castle! Probably as surprised as anyone, Macbeth says he will ride ahead and bring the good news of Duncan's coming to his wife, and only then does Duncan say: “My worthy Cawdor!” That is, only after receiving Macbeth's earlier public commitment of duty, and now his acquiescence in receiving him as a guest in his castle, does Duncan publicly confirm by his own words the honor he had had Ross bestow on Macbeth. Once at Inverness, Duncan's plan culminates in his sending Banquo to Lady Macbeth with the gift of a diamond that night, just before going to sleep. Nor has he been without protective care for himself, even then, for his grooms are just outside his
bedchamber, and he has asked Macduff to call upon him early that morning (II, 1: 13-16; II, 3: 50-51). So there is the plan in full: another high honor for Macbeth, a bauble for his wife, the appointment of the next king (so killing Duncan, as Macbeth realizes at once, still leaves an equally large obstacle in the way), and then arranging to become Macbeth's guest, taking some precaution nonetheless. It is an excellent plan and would have worked, even in spite of the witches' favorable prophecies, had it not been for the extraordinary ambition and persuasiveness of Lady Macbeth, coupled with her and her husband's stupidity, and one other unanticipated factor, to be discussed below.

This is the well-conceived plan that did not work. Now let us see the ill-conceived one that did. If one examines carefully Macbeth's written and oral communications to his wife, one will discover that he never reveals to her two important facts—the prophecy the witches made for Banquo, and the naming of Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland. Had he done so, their task in usurping the throne would have looked at least doubly difficult and far less promising. This is why they make no overt plan for killing Malcolm, though both he and Donalbain, his younger brother, are at Inverness with their father that night. And it is also why—after luck, not brains, catapults them into the throne—Macbeth plans Banquo's murder alone, without the queen's help. In the case of Duncan's murder, Lady Macbeth must first persuade Macbeth to do a deed they both acknowledge to be deeply immoral, and also convince him it can be done with impunity. To prove the latter, she suggests that by plying the two chamberlains with alcohol she can put them into a deep sleep, leaving Duncan at their mercy. Macbeth adds a touch of his own: they will use the chamberlains' daggers for the dead, and then spread blood on their bodies as well. In the ensuing clamor, their guilt will be accepted by all.

As it turns out, although her plan called for their doing the deed together, it ends up wholly in Macbeth's hands. And some improvisations are made. From Lady Macbeth the audience learns that she has drugged the grooms' wine and only then done her part in laying out their daggers for Macbeth's use immediately thereafter. But, stricken with terror after committing the murder, Macbeth forgets to smear the grooms with blood and leave the bloody daggers with them—a task that must then be undertaken by Lady Macbeth, whose hands are bloodied in the process, like Macbeth's. And a final improvisation, wholly uncalled for in the perfected plan, occurs when Macbeth goes up to see the dead king. This is the real reason why Lady Macbeth, upon hearing Macbeth blurt out his account to those assembled in the castle, faints straightway.

How good is this plan, both in its original and its improvised variations? The weak point of the former was its blaming the chamberlains, who, if they had any motive for killing the king, would not be so obliging as to lie down immediately in the very spot where they were expected to stay for the night and fall asleep there, defiled with blood. And, of course, once awake the chamberlains would stoutly deny they had such a motive, would tell of being plied with liquor by the queen, and might receive support from those in the king's trust (see Lennox's allusion at III, 6: 11-16). Now, for some reason we never learn from Macbeth's own lips, he quickly decides to kill the guards when he goes up to see the dead king. From Lenox, who accompanied him, we learn that the guards "star'd, and were distracted." Macbeth must have observed this himself, and perhaps thought it unnatural that they were not simply asleep (the drug applied by Lady Macbeth may have caused this unusual condition). What, he might have wondered, would happen if they were shaken and still would not awaken from their drunken stupor? Did he guess that they had been drugged—a fact of which he was not informed by Lady Macbeth? Did he fear that an inquiry into their condition might lead back to Lady Macbeth and himself?

By killing the guards, Macbeth does something exceedingly strange, and hardly justifiable on the grounds of the righteous indignation to which he pretends. But he takes this risk, and Lady Macbeth—not seeing what it can accomplish for them—swoons. At this point, a huge piece of unanticipated luck falls their way: Malcolm and Donalbain, fearing for their own lives after their father's murder, flee, which, as Macduff later tells Ross, "puts upon them suspicion of the deed," it being thought—no doubt with much urging from the Macbeths—that the chamberlains were suborned by them to murder their father. The story is still highly improbable, but another accident helps make it accepted. It was Macduff who demanded that Macbeth explain
why he killed the grooms; after he does, Lady Macbeth's apparent fainting spell may have kept him from pursuing the matter further. That Macduff did indeed harbor suspicions is shown by his later refusal to be present at Macbeth's coronation. But there was one person in the castle that morning who had much more solid grounds than Macduff for suspecting Macbeth, and who had actually concluded the murder was done by him. This, of course, was Banquo. Just after Lady Macbeth's collapse, Banquo calls for everyone to get dressed and return "to question this most bloody piece of work, to know it further." But we can easily guess why he never gives voice to his suspicions (explicitly admitted at the beginning of Act III): he must have thought the witches' prophecy about the future kingship of his sons would be realized after their prediction about Macbeth's gaining the throne is. We can therefore imagine that the Macbeths unexpectedly found in Banquo a strong supporter for their effort to condemn the king's sons and then install Macbeth in Duncan's place. This, too, was how the Macbeth overcame the obstacle Lady Macbeth had never been told about—that of Malcolm's being named Prince of Cumberland. In other words, by one and the same piece of luck, wholly unanticipated, Malcolm could be blamed for Duncan's murder and removed from the line of succession! His flight became the key to Macbeth's success.

Why all this emphasis on plans? For one thing, it tells us something about Duncan and about the Macbeths—about their mental stature. It permits us to distinguish further between a tyrannical usurper like the Duke of Gloucester (in Richard III) and the Macbeths, the latter being more superstitious, more moral, and a good deal less intelligent than the former. But there is a general purpose as well, for it refines the reader's perception and understanding of human affairs generally, and moves him closer to being able to say whether life is a tale told by an idiot or not. To the extent that intelligent purpose, human or nonhuman, directs life, it is not such a tale—in fact it is the precise opposite of such a tale. In The Tempest we see the wise, premeditated plan of its hero, Prospero, determine the action of practically the whole play. In Macbeth we learn how one serious bit of miscalculation or ignorance (of Lady Macbeth's character by Duncan) can thwart an otherwise excellent plan, and how chance can make a very poor one succeed. These are important features of human life, but in neither case does life lose its causal intelligibility. In other words, we can see just what it is that makes the two plans develop and eventuate as they do, showing that no part of life is a tale told by an idiot. The part of life least deserving that description is the perfectly designed work of art—the philosophical drama—which allows no part of itself to bear any but a necessary relationship to all other parts and the whole. The play Macbeth itself is an entirely sufficient proof that life is not unintelligible sound and fury!

MACDUFF AND ROSS

Macduff and Ross are cousins, but they are very unlike each other. Much of Macduff's character was already available to Shakespeare in Holinshed's Chronicles, whereas Ross was barely named and had to be built up from scratch. We see Ross before we see Macduff. With Angus, he comes riding in from Fife. There, according to the account he gives King Duncan, the traitor Cawdor and the King of Norway himself were defeated in battle by someone Ross refers to as "Bellona's bridegroom." Bellona was the goddess of war, and most commentators take this hero to be Macbeth again. But Fife is a great distance from the area near Forres where the first battle has just taken place—the battle involving the bleeding sergeant, Malcolm, Macbeth, Banquo, Macdonwald, and the Norwegian lord. For that simple reason Macbeth could not also have been the hero of Fife—a conclusion fortified by the fact that Macbeth knows nothing of Cawdor's disloyalty (I, 4: 11-12). And who a more likely candidate for this role than that other great warrior, the thane of Fife himself? For reasons unknown to us, Ross' strange reference to "Bellona's bridegroom" seems to have had the purpose of concealing from Duncan's view the heroic deeds of that other thane and Ross' own cousin, Macduff.

Macduff himself has not yet arrived at Forres, nor is he present when Duncan makes his announcement about the succession. But he must have ridden in from the battle at Fife before the king's party leaves for Inverness, because he is with that party as it arrives there. Within the castle, he and Lennox have been quartered in a kind of annex, and we first hear Macduff speak in the famous porter scene early the next morning, when he and
Lennox knock at the gate to be admitted into the main part of the castle. Minutes before, both Macbeths had heard the knocking just as Lady Macbeth leaves to return the chamberlains' daggers. Macbeth goes to the gate and is greeted rather coolly by Macduff: “Is the king stirring, worthy thane?” He adds that the king had commanded him “to call timely on him. I have almost slipp’d the hour.” Hearing this the reader once again senses the importance of accident: a few minutes earlier, and the Macbeths might have been caught red-handed, literally.

Calling alone on the king, Macduff is the first to find him murdered, and from his exclamation we learn that he is a very pious man: “Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope the Lord’s anointed temple”—the last phrase combining elements from the Old and New Testaments. He rouses the whole house, calling by name Banquo, Donalbain, and Malcolm, but not Ross or Lady Macbeth. It is Macduff who asks Macbeth why he had just killed the guards, and who then seconds Banquo's proclaimed opposition to the “undivulged pretense … of treasonous malice.” The next we see of him is at a meeting with Ross, apparently as he emerges from Macbeth's castle. For some reason Ross must have left the castle quickly after the murder, for he asks Macduff what happened there. Macduff tells him that the flight of Malcolm and Donalbain cast suspicion of their father's murder on them, that Macbeth had already been named king (presumably by a council of the thanes, unattended by Ross, in the castle) and that he has already left for Scone to be invested. Asked by Ross whether he will go to Scone, Macduff says he will go instead to Fife, his own castle. And to Ross' declaring his own intention to follow Macbeth to Scone, Macduff bids him see that things are well done there, “Lest our old robes sit easier than our new!” Either suspecting Macbeth of murder, or knowing of his character otherwise, Macduff is clearly uneasy, and is courageous—or imprudent—enough to reveal his state of mind by absenting himself from the coronation.

In Act III Macbeth has Banquo murdered, and in Act IV, the family of Macduff. The editors are never able to make out where Banquo and Fleance are riding the afternoon of their murder, and think it unimportant to boot. A guess could be hazarded rather easily, had they not followed one of the earliest editors (Capell) in locating Macbeth's palace at Forres, not far from Cawdor and Inverness in northern Scotland. In all likelihood, they do so not because of any stage directions, of which there are none, but because they assume Macbeth's second visit to the witches (at the end of Act III) takes place where he originally met them—a heath near Forres. From Inverness (near Forres), however, he had gone to Scone to be crowned, and no direction of any sort ever has him coming away from there (historically, the Scottish kings were likely to reside in Perth, close to Scone). If one also realizes that the final action of the play, in Act V, plainly takes place in or near the castle he had been busy fortifying at Dunsinane—close to both Scone and Perth—one will not have Macbeth spend all his time in Acts III and IV one hundred or more miles to the north at Forres. Moreover, he seeks out the witches not at the heath near Forres but at something called “the pit of Acheron”—a fictitious location derived from the Bible (2 Kings i, 2-7). Like its Biblical archetype, this pit seems to be known for its supernatural clientele. Nor should we forget that the three witches in the play are associated with the various winds and can therefore meet anywhere with one who seeks them—all the more if they are, so to speak, hovering over him and watching his destiny, as they are with Macbeth.

If Macbeth's castle in Act III is actually located at either Scone or Dunsinane, it is also within twenty or thirty miles of wherever it was in Fife that Macduff had his castle. Could this have been Banquo and Fleance's destination, so mysteriously left unidentified when Macbeth questions Banquo about their ride the day of the banquet? The reason for Banquo's reserve is perfectly clear: Macduff had refused to attend Macbeth's coronation and was already under suspicion. No doubt Banquo had worries to share with a close friend—only Banquo calls him “Dear Duff” the morning of Duncan's murder—and therefore, despite being Macbeth's chief guest, and despite Macbeth's strong and repeated urgings that he stay, Banquo insists on departing for several hours, perhaps until the early evening. This, and possibly the news of Banquo's murder as well, may have contributed to Macduff's decision to rebuff Macbeth's messenger and flee to England—a decision of which we learn very shortly afterward (II, 3: 94; III, 6: 39-43).
On his visit to the witches, Macbeth is told both that he should beware the thane of Fife and that (as he interprets it) he can be harmed or defeated by no human hand. Despite this last guarantee, he decides to kill Macduff, just to make sure. Discovering Macduff's flight to England, however, he decides immediately, and without any reason, to slaughter his wife and babes instead. The next scene is as mystifying as it is pathetic. Last present at the banquet, Ross is suddenly found in conversation with his cousin Lady Macbeth (and her son) in her castle, hearing her castigate her husband for leaving his wife, babes, mansion, and titles “in a place from whence himself does fly. …” Ross says he will return before long, hints he would burst into tears at their plight if he stays longer, and then departs—leaving the reader, as well, in complete ignorance as to the purpose of his visit. A moment later an unidentified messenger enters, warning Lady Macbeth to flee with her children, and in another moment the murderers themselves appear to kill her and the boy.

Let us try to explain these puzzles. The murderers, of course, were sent by Macbeth, and the messenger could only have been sent by Lennox, whom we know to be in Macbeth's confidence, yet opposed to him. But why Ross? Why has he come to Macduff's castle? He offers his cousin no assistance, gives her no warning, tells her nothing of Macbeth's hostility and tyranny. Only one possibility remains: Ross had to be sent by Macbeth, for Macbeth could not know in advance how Macduff had left his castle guarded, and only someone Lady Macduff trusted—in this case a cousin of hers—could easily gain access and find out. Of course, this casts Ross in the worst possible light as a tool of the tyrant and a traitor to his relatives and friends. (Furness cites M. F. Libby's old suspicions of Ross in Some New Notes on Macbeth [1893].) Whether he actually returned (per his promise) as one of the murderers is hard to say, though not impossible, since they may be masked, and only one of them speaks. But startling as this deduction is, one fact is even more startling: Macduff had left his castle entirely unprotected! No army, no guards, no servants at the gates or door, as shown by the fact that both the messenger and the murderers are able to enter without the slightest interposition, obstruction, or disturbance. There is no one else around, so that Lady Macduff hardly exaggerates when she pictures her situation as one of complete and unnatural abandonment, and her husband as a traitor to his family.

Before trying to explain this, let us examine the last scene coupling Ross and Macduff, at the very end of Act IV. Macduff is already with Malcolm in England, and has passed the test of his loyalty to which he has been subjected by a suspicious young Malcolm, who explains to the older but rather simpleminded and naive man that “Devlish Macbeth by many of these trains hath sought to win me into his power, and modest wisdom plucks me from over-credulous haste.” Suddenly Ross appears and is greeted by Macduff as his “ever-gentle cousin.” Ross speaks of their poor country, Scotland, groaning in oppression and suffering, and is then asked directly by Macduff: “How does my wife?” Answer: “Well.” Question: “And all my children?” Answer: “Well, too.” Question: “The tyrant has not batter’d at their peace?” Answer: “No; they were well at peace when I did leave ’em.”

Only with this last answer does Ross indicate—though Macduff does not seem to notice—his earlier presence at Macduff's castle. But that answer has one or more of three possible defects: either it is politically naive, or much less cognizant of Macbeth's intentions toward the Macduffs than Ross should have been, even as an innocent; or it is technically true, since when he left them they had not yet been assailed; or it is only metaphorically true—wickedly true—since their being "well at peace" would be consistent with their being dead, if he left them a second time as one of their murderers, or immediately afterward. In any case, it seems entirely odd that Ross should not know of, and report upon, the horrible fate of Macduff's family.

Very shortly afterward, this last peculiarity is shown to be such by an astonishing reversal. In line 178, Ross had just spoken of Macduff's family as “well at peace.” In line 201 he prepares Macduff for hearing the worst possible news, which he then delivers, full force, in 204: “Your castle is surprised; your wife and babes savagely slaughtered. To relate this manner, were, on the quarry of these murder’d deer, to add the death of you.” Incredulous, Macduff asks, “My children too?” Answer: “Wife, children, servants, all that could be found.” Macduff: “And I must be from thence! My wife kill’d too?” And finally:
Did Heaven look on,
And would not take their part? Sinful Macduff!
They were all struck for thee. Naught that I am,
Not for their own demerits, but for mine,
Fell slaughter on their souls: Heaven rest them now!

By this point, we have learned quite a bit about both Macduff and Ross. First, Ross knows about the complete extermination of Macduff’s household, down to the last detail. He speaks as if he could even “relate the manner” of it, though he is never pressed to do so. Since he himself makes no claim to have learned this from others, after he left the Macduff castle, he must have learned it while he was there, at the time of the murders themselves.

As for Macduff, notice that he and Ross both confirm our suspicion that he had left no soldiery, no guards to defend the castle. How could this possibly happen, particularly since Macduff is not without suspicion that the “tyrant” might have “batter’d at their peace.” Only one explanation seems possible, and it may be seen in the line “Did heaven look on, and would not take their part?” Macduff is portrayed as having trusted to heaven to defend his family—trusted, that is, to the God of Christianity, the “gentle heavens” he even now begs to let him confront Macbeth in personal combat. That God, Macduff’s lines suggest, could be expected to defend innocent people against attack, and only failed to do so not because of any sins of theirs, which were nil, but because of his, Macduff’s, sins! In short, Macduff takes it to follow from his Christian belief that God permits harms, or at least injustices, only to those who have sinned against Him, or to those for whom a sinner cares. Nor does it strike him that some question about God’s justness is raised by the latter case—the case he takes to apply to his own family.

If one responds to this conjecture that it is entirely unrealistic to suppose a man like Macduff so fanatically given to such beliefs as to take no precautions for his family, one would be correct—on the level of real psychological probability. But Shakespeare frequently makes a motive unrealistically extreme in order to display it, to bring it to our attention, even at the risk of a certain unrealism. Or better, he gives up a more superficial realism for a deeper one. Many examples can be cited to show this. In real life, would a Jew (Shylock) really try to cut a pound of flesh out of a Christian (Antonio)? Would a friar be likely to give Juliet an apparently fatal potion? Could there be a girl so naive as Miranda? Would Enobarbus, after deserting Antony, drop dead out of a sense of guilt? Or, from Macbeth itself, would Lady Macbeth never have complained to Macbeth of her increasing isolation from him? Is it realistically possible, in the superficial sense (as Freud, taking this to be the only sense, denied it was), for Macbeth to have changed so rapidly after becoming king? Still a murderer by premeditation, as he showed with Banquo, he knowingly becomes, only a short time later, a murderer by impulse with Macduff’s family, announcing that “From this moment, the very firstlings of my heart shall be the firstlings of my hand.”

The exaggeration in Macduff’s motivation must have some relation to the subject of the play as a whole, which is the extent to which human life, and the universe, are intelligible, reasonable, moral. Christianity represents one pole among the possible conceptions, for, whatever place it allows to evil and sin, it insists on the supremacy of good, and of good manifested more through love than through justice, though both must be combined in the ultimate divine dispensation and governance. The primacy Christianity gives to love, and thus to “gentleness” (again, as in Macduff’s appeal to “gentle heaven”), is an element closer to the feminine than the masculine; it results in excessive trust, excessive confidence that a good God will come to our rescue, so that we need not make sure we ourselves are stronger than, and smarter than, the human forces of evil.

This problem is explicitly brought to our attention in Macduff’s castle just before the murders. Lady Macduff is talking to her cousin Ross, whom Macduff later addresses as “my ever-gentle cousin,” but who—we now know—intends, in but a moment, to have her murdered. She complains bitterly that her husband has acted unnaturally in leaving his family unprotected. Her example is that of the mother wren, most diminutive of birds, that will fight to protect her young against attack. Ross, of course, tells her to have confidence in her
husband's judgment—just as his actions are about to confirm hers. After Ross leaves, a conversation occurs between Lady Macduff and her small son, in which she talks as if his father is dead and asks how he will survive. He says, like the birds she has just been talking about—that is, by foraging on his own, by nature. But what about the traps men have laid for birds, she asks. He responds that such traps are laid not for “poor” birds but (by implication) for rich ones, and he has become a poor bird. What she means, of course, is that children cannot take care of themselves, nor can good people generally, and he—naively—thinks that only the wealthy must protect themselves against attack, since the poor offer no temptation to would-be attackers.

Asked what he will do for a father, the son asks, in turn, what she will do for a husband. Her joking reply that she can buy twenty (and his, that she could then equally sell them) tells us something about the inner core of human life, which is founded, necessarily, on ties far stronger than those of commercial advantage and exchange. The family, the root of society, is based on love and loyalty, on mutual devotion and protection. Otherwise it cannot last, children will receive neither proper nurture, nourishment, or protection, and all will fall asunder. To strengthen this loyalty, men take vows, and are held to them by a moral sense they themselves heighten, supported by the most drastic sanctions. This is why Lady Macduff can tell her son that his father was a traitor, one who swore and lied. She is thinking of his loyalty to her and the children, not to Macbeth, of whose relations to Macduff she seems entirely ignorant. A traitor must be hung—though, as the boy shrewdly reports, this will require that there be more honest men than wicked ones. And when she says, “Now God help thee, poor monkey!” we realize that their discussion of human affairs, up to that point, had included no reference to and shown no need for, an almighty Being, a God or gods. But the inherent instability, and insecurity, of human affairs seems—as her prayerful remark shows—to require the belief in some supreme and stable power that can be appealed to when all else fails, that can strengthen the dedication of human society itself to its necessary bonds and institutions. Society requires religion—and Christianity seems to be the main example here—but religion can also make men too dependent on God, and insufficiently dependent on themselves.

After the mysterious messenger comes in to warn her of grave danger, Lady Macduff asks why she should fly if she has done no harm, and immediately corrects herself by acknowledging what “this earthly world” is like, suggesting a distinction between it and the afterworld. It was a “womanly defence,” she says, to have thought that because she has done no harm, she would not be harmed. No, this earthly world is not like that, for here “to do harm is often laudable, to do good sometime accounted dangerous folly.” In a moment, she and her son will be subjected to the most blameable harm of murder—to deter or repel which it would have been most proper, most laudable to harm the would-be attackers. Similarly, to do good to enemies is not only accounted but is most dangerous folly—Lady Macduff does not speak strongly enough. She too remains under the influence of her Christian upbringing, which asks that evil not be resisted and that all men be loved, thus making it hard for her to acknowledge the crucial political distinction between friends and enemies, the former to be benefited, the latter harmed. This accounts for her hoping her husband is in “no place so unsanctified” that murderers such as these could find him. This is the same thought Macduff himself must have had when he left his family unprotected, thinking it a place sanctified by their innocence. But of course there is no place which by any sanctification whatsoever could keep men like the murderers from committing their crimes.

The scene's end shows not only the immoral strong slaying the moral weak, but gives us another view of the problem of treason. Like Lady Macduff before, the murderers accuse Macduff of treason. She, of course, had in mind his apparent disloyalty to his family, but the murderers his supposed (by them) disloyalty to Macbeth. Disloyalty is sometimes merited, however, as the latter case shows: it may be necessary to averting, or expelling, great evil. The moral laws, which society necessarily thinks of as absolute—and which are stated most absolutely, if unpoltically, by Christianity—must bow to a larger understanding of justice, looking to the real benefits and harms of society. The spirited loyalty of Macduff's son is necessary, but not enough; his mother's affection and moral demands are necessary, but not enough: both must be directed by a wisdom capable of suppressing the wicked and advancing the good. In this play, Malcolm, young as he is, represents
ROSS

By its outcome, *Macbeth* gives the impression of being an extremely moral play—a play in which two murdering usurpers at first succeed but ultimately, and by some kind of cosmic necessity (or so it appears) come to horrible ends, the one killing herself, the other meeting a violent death in battle, with both utterly miserable in the final period of their lives. Why then Ross? What does he stand for in this play? Having come to know Ross for what he is in the two last acts, we are anxious to return to the earlier parts of the play and reexamine his entire career. This Ross is perhaps the most successful scoundrel in all of Shakespeare, and never, from beginning to end, does he suffer misfortune or defeat. Not only is he never discovered: at the very end he even reaps the rewards of the thanes who opposed the tyrant, being elevated, with them, to an earldom!

Let us see whether Shakespeare provides any sign of Ross' true colors early in the play. If he did not, would he be Shakespeare? But we must look with eagle eyes, for men like Ross are most difficult to penetrate. After all, he is, to simple eyes like Macduff's, the “ever-gentle” Ross—a tribute to his powers of deception. When he first arrives at Forres, in Act I, scene 2, Duncan does not recognize him, but Malcolm does. Ross and Angus seem to have just ridden up, and Duncan asks him from where, again not knowing. It is at this point that Ross tells about the battle at Fife—a battle editors often place Macbeth at both because Ross names no one but “Bellona’s bridegroom” as its hero and because they have not consulted a map. We have conjectured earlier that Ross uses this rhetorical invention to keep from naming Macduff—the logical person to be fighting at Fife—but we do not know why. He certainly has no hesitation to go to greet Macbeth, coming from a battle scene not too far from Forres, as the new thane of Cawdor. He says, “I’ll see it done,” but when it is done, Angus is there again accompanying Ross.

The words Ross first addresses to Macbeth, when they meet, are peculiar. He mentions the king's “reading” of Macbeth's personal success in the fight against the rebels, and finding him responsible for many deaths among the Norwegians. “As thick as hail came post after post” praising Macbeth's defense of Duncan's kingdom—but this is queer, for Ross was not in the scene when the bleeding sergeant spoke, since he seems to have entered with Angus just afterward. Yet he never mentions the sergeant, speaks as if only written messages appeared, and exaggerates the number of them (“post after post”). This leads us to think that Ross may have at least overheard the bleeding sergeant but does not wish to mention it, and then flatters Macbeth by overstating the number of messengers. In that case, perhaps Ross, from the beginning, wanted to see Macbeth elevated, and had no wish to see Macduff—his own cousin—elevated. This inclination (his flattery of Macbeth, and his playing on his ambition) even shows itself at the beginning of Ross' speech to Macbeth, where he says the king did not know whether he should be praising Macbeth or himself (as the one Macbeth serves)—something the king certainly never expressed, but bound to have a subtle effect on Macbeth. And the same tendency shows itself in Ross' last words on that occasion, when he says that “for an earnest of a greater honour, he [the king] bade me, from him, call thee thane of Cawdor. …” This “earnest” or promise is certainly a bald invention by Ross, meant to play upon Macbeth's ambition, and flatter—the opposite of Angus' intention, which was to reduce, rather than to add to, the king's words.

It is interesting that when Macbeth, Banquo, Ross, and Angus enter the king's presence together, the king speaks to both Macbeth and Banquo, makes his crucial announcement about Malcolm (as we have already seen), but says nothing at all to Ross and Angus, who simply stand there without a word. We shall see the importance of this in a moment. The next time Ross' name is mentioned, he is simply numbered among those nobles who accompany the king into Macbeth's castle, and the time after that is one some overbold editors want to undo. Here is why. We must realize that the king's chamber was in a hall of the castle that had several adjoining rooms, and that was probably approached by mounting a staircase. When Macduff and Lennox come in from the annex early in the morning, Macduff is shown to the king's chamber by Macbeth, who must then be presumed to return to the central area at the foot of the staircase (off of which, incidentally, must be
his own bedroom). When Macduff comes out, he must run at least to the head of the staircase, if not to the
floor below, and shout out about the murder. Macbeth and Lennox then go running up and Macbeth kills the
guards, but, according to the stage direction in the folio, they come down with one other person—our old
friend Ross. Ross says nothing, and, throughout the excitement, still says nothing. Rub him out, say some
editors and critics: what purpose does he serve? How could he appear out of nowhere and then say nothing? In
the Arden edition he is expunged, without a word of explanation.

We can turn this apparent chaos into an intelligible pattern by thinking along with Shakespeare, instead of
presuming ourselves superior to him. In the two previous scenes where Ross was present (because named in
the stage directions there too), he also said nothing. Here he surprises us by his very appearance even more
than his silence. Looking ahead, we know that in the next scene he has quite a bit to say, telling Macduff he
will follow Macbeth to Scone, despite Macduff's veiled warning. But he lets us infer that he had been
mysteriously absent from the castle when the discussion of Duncan's murder took place and the other thanes
decided upon Macbeth as his successor. Now, in the castle, just after the discovery of the murder, he does not
go up with Macbeth and Lennox, but he does come down with them. What does this suggest? In the rooms in
the hall before the king's, we had already been rather curiously told there was a second chamber Macbeth had
to pass on his way to, and back from, the king's. We learn from the queen, responding to Macbeth's inquiry,
that in it were Donalbain and someone else—the second person is not named by the queen. Editors who
suppose that Malcolm and Donalbain were lodged together, since they are shown together after the clamor,
ask why Lady Macbeth mentions only Donalbain (Arden edition, p. 53, note 25). But let us assume she knew
what she was saying. This means Malcolm was in still another room—a third chamber, probably beyond the
king's, either alone, or, like his brother, with someone else. In one of those chambers was probably Angus,
and in the other, Ross.

Given the attention Donalbain and his unnamed partner get from Shakespeare, through Macbeth's narration,
we would have to say that Ross is more likely to have been Donalbain's than Malcolm's chambermate. Why
such apparently irrelevant details, as telling us what Macbeth heard outside the door of the second chamber? It
is, I suspect, to cause us to put two things together: the problem Malcolm posed for Macbeth (without his
wife's knowing it), and the character of Ross, which we have begun to suspect, and which later on becomes as
clear as Shakespeare can allow in such a case. Macbeth understood that the Prince of Cumberland would
inherit the title from his murdered father, yet he could not dispose of Malcolm the same night without giving
himself away. What he could do is begin a relationship that at some point would lead to Malcolm's undoing,
and Ross, already so useful, might be glad to associate with the young men, preferring Donalbain, perhaps,
because it seemed less direct, and because of his youth, but really with Malcolm in mind from the outset. It is
then interesting to speculate which of the two men Macbeth heard was Ross and which Donalbain. In any
case, Ross would not be told of Duncan's intended murder—he was hardly enough of an intimate for
that—and so, when the clamor broke out, might be expected to bolt, as a person whose sense of self-interest
was peculiarly keen. That is why he comes flying down the stairs with Macbeth and Lennox!

Why did Ross absent himself from the ensuing meeting of thanes by which Macbeth's fate was decided? He
could not know in advance, for sure, how that meeting would go—after all, the possibility that suspicion
would be directed at Macbeth himself could hardly be ruled out. Nor could he be sure just how he himself was
perceived, just then, by others—that is, whether the group headed by Macduff would sense his recently having
favored Macbeth over his own cousin. As it turns out, he need not have feared. In response to his inquiry,
Macduff tells him that Macbeth has already left for Scone—but Ross, somewhat nervous up to the point of
decision, and outside the castle, might already have observed Macbeth's departure himself. And if anyone
doubts Ross' capacity as a most thoroughgoing liar and deceiver, let him look at the cruel way he talks to the
superstitious old man in that very scene. First he assures the old man that Duncan's horses broke out of their
stalls that night, an apparent omen of the disobedience soon to be demonstrated in the murder. Then, hearing
the old man report, from hearsay, that those horses ate each other, Ross—no doubt enjoying himself
immensely—extends his lie quite a bit further, saying: “They did so, to th’ amazement of mine eyes that
Look’d upon’t.” After this, no word of Ross’ should be viewed without suspicion by the reader, and, as we soon learn, there is much more to be suspicious of.

True to his word to Macduff, Ross follows Macbeth to Scone, and is next seen at the banquet Macbeth has prepared in his palace for Banquo, and just after Banquo's murder some distance from the palace. Throughout that banquet scene, Ross shows himself to be a most serviceable courtier, almost always saying just the sort of thing Macbeth would want him to (a possible exception is his asking about the strange sights Macbeth reports seeing). But by that point another flagrant mystery has been waved before us, like a bloody flag, and that is the identity of the Third Murderer. Without going into all the details, Macbeth has been shown directly talking to two men, convincing them to murder Banquo, and Fleance as well. He tells them he will advise them of where to stay and the exact time for the deed. This he actually does, at least in part, through the Third Murderer, with whom he is never shown talking, and who comes independently of the other two to the scene of the crime. Why so much mystery about this man? The first two murderers are from some other part of the country than the palace area, and have been chosen because Macbeth placed greater trust in the reliability of revenge as a motive, rather than profit. These men think they have been wronged by Macbeth, but he persuades them that Banquo was responsible, not himself. It is the Third Murderer who knows his way around the palace and knows the habits of visitors, such as the strange one of leaving their horses a mile from the palace and walking the rest of the way. He must also make sure Fleance does not escape. As it turns out, all three set on Banquo, whose denunciation of one of them as a “slave” suggests that he was known to him. Perhaps not unintentionally, the First Murderer puts out the torch Fleance was carrying, allowing his escape into the night, unpursued.

Even Macbeth has been suspected of being the Third Murderer, so great has been the urge to solve this mystery. But Macbeth will not do for more reasons than one, the foremost being that he seems spontaneously surprised at hearing the First Murderer's report about what happened, particularly in connection with Fleance. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that Macbeth would have arranged for independent reports from both the First and the Third Murderer—and that the Third Murderer was able to find his way back to the palace before the First, who knew little of the area. This might account for a certain jocular quality in Macbeth when the banquet scene opens, though his good humor also suggests that the Third Murderer could not have told him the whole truth, that he reported Banquo's death, but perhaps said of Fleance only that one of the others was in pursuit of him. It is also possible, however, that the Third Murderer did not get a chance to report to Macbeth, or perhaps preferred not to, knowing that Fleance had escaped. Macbeth's good spirits at the banquet could have been based on expectation rather than report. In either case, Ross might well have been the Third Murderer. His aptitude for such concealment we learn shortly afterward, when he visits the Macduff castle for hidden and murderous reasons. Whether, or what, he reported to Macbeth before the banquet—and before the First Murderer reports—is much less certain.

We need not recapitulate the role Ross must have played in the Macduff murders, nor the deft but striking change in his story about that tragedy when, again mysteriously, he shows up in England. Let us try to explain the reason for that change, between lines 178 and 193, growing to a climax at 204, where Ross had first denied, and then admitted, what in fact happened to Macduff's family. To begin with, why is he in England at all? His reason is given in line 186: “now is the time of help; your eye in Scotland would create soldiers, make our women fight, to doff their dire distresses.” But we must realize that by “your eye” Ross means Macduff’s eye, not Malcolm’s: Ross has come to win Macduff’s return. Why? So that Macbeth can kill him. Ross thus turns out to be precisely the kind of person Malcolm feared Macduff might be, that is, someone sent by Macbeth to trick him into returning. Why Macbeth took such interest in Macduff can easily be guessed: Macduff was a potent soldier, and the only living person against whom the witches had warned him.

At this point, the conversation—as Ross must have viewed it—takes an unexpected turn, for Malcolm, not Macduff, responds: “Be’t their comfort we’re coming thither. Gracious England hath lent us good Siward and ten thousand men; and older and a better soldier none that Christendom gives out.” And in the very next lines,
Ross begins his shift. Having just learned that he will not be able to separate Macduff from Malcolm, and that both are about to invade Scotland with a very powerful English army, it is “Goodbye Macbeth, hello Malcolm!” From this point onward, in the course of the last act, Ross' history is all told in stage directions. Scene 4 shows that he is absent from Malcolm's invading army, but in the final scene (scene 8) he appears out of the blue, alongside Malcolm and Old Siward, flattering the latter and his son, receiving—along with the other thanes—the title of earl, and avoiding being classified among the “cruel ministers of this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen”—in short, apparently crowned with success.

Ross is the consummate opportunist, always looking out for himself, content to remain in the shadow of great men, and completely unscrupulous in their service, willing to do anything, however foul, that they require of him, yet so good at appearing otherwise, and deceiving everybody, that he is never detected and never punished. Whatever the forces in human nature or the world at large that are working for justice, they are not so powerful as to prevent the coming into existence, and even the flourishing, of men without a speck of justice in them. Ross is also important because he makes us even more aware of the hidden motive, the secret action in human affairs, linking together and making intelligible a whole series of events. These events, stretching from the very beginning to the very end of the play, would have to be considered unintelligible mysteries were it not for the clues, carefully left by Shakespeare, pointing to a solution in the character and deeds of Ross. Thus understood, Ross is not a mere superfluity, or of merely marginal interest in the play, but an essential element, staking out one pole of evil in human affairs that must never be forgotten, either by political practitioners—statesmen—or moral and political philosophers. As for the judgment to be placed on this apparently happy scoundrel, we would have to consider not only the evil done to others, but the state of his soul in itself, the full deformity of which Shakespeare was compelled to leave to the reader's surmise. Alone, without friends, caring for no one, willing to kill anyone, never in open command of events, completely dependent on the rise and fall of the great, always calculating, never at ease, exulting only in the success of his machinations—here is not a whole man but a narrow part of a man, worked to a peak of efficiency within that narrow range, and sacrificing all else to it.

THE FATE OF THE MACBETHS

The central focus of the play is on Macbeth and his wife—not only on their words and actions, but on the state of soul from which these emanate. Of all the mysteries in the play, the chief, by far, is how their internal condition at the beginning can develop into what it becomes by the end. The paradox was well stated by Freud: their conditions seem to interchange, with Lady Macbeth becoming much more like what Macbeth had been, and Macbeth becoming much more like what she had been: “She becomes all remorse, he all defiance.” Freud does not regard such a transformation as psychologically impossible in itself, but he does think it impossible within the very compressed time frame of the play (one week, he says), and on the basis of the motives explicitly suggested there. For psychological plausibility, Freud prefers the historical account in Holinshed, where Macbeth, after his usurpation, rules justly for ten years, and only then begins the murders of Banquo and others. That chronology would be consistent with Macbeth's increasing desperation as the childless condition of his marriage persists.

Freud is mistaken about the actual time frame of the play, but he is correct about its felt duration, which certainly seems exceedingly short, with actions swiftly succeeding each other from beginning to end (see Furness, pp. 504-07 for a time analysis and some of its complications). In either case, his charge of lapsed causality against Shakespeare would be devastating, because the states of mind of the protagonists are so obviously at the center of Shakespeare's attention, and the general problem of the intelligibility of human affairs so particularly important in this play. A gap or void in causal explanation would, in fact, be fatal, despite the play's dramatic effectiveness. But let us remember Lincoln's praise: “I think nothing equals Macbeth. It is wonderful.” Given Lincoln's inclination to search deeply for causes, he must have found in the play all the connections necessary to explaining its outcome. Let us see.
Both Macbeths want the crown badly, and immediately think of murder as the means of getting it. Clearly this is the case with Macbeth once he receives his prediction from the witches, and with his wife once she receives word of it by letter from him. In fact, it seems they had spoken of assassination even before the action of the play begins, and that he had then been the author of “this enterprise,” not she (I, 7: 47-48). Clearly also their present views of the enterprise are sharply divergent. She is absolutely determined to do everything required for the purpose, tarrying for no moral or religious compunctions. On the other hand, the thought of murdering Duncan makes Macbeth's very soul tremble with fear and foreboding. While his conscience tells him that the act is immoral and irreligious, he would risk the life to come (I, 7: 1-28; I, 3: 130-42) were it not for the likely consequences of the assassination here on earth. To kill such a king as Duncan, under such circumstances, would make Macbeth himself hated and the likely victim of a second assassination.

Until that point Macbeth had evidently not considered concocting a plan both to keep from becoming known as the murderer and to lay the guilt on someone else. We can also see from his great “If it were done …” speech that he partly conceals direct moral considerations, as such, from himself by trying to think of them as merely prudential: thus all he says about being Duncan's kinsman, subject, host (he omits beneficiary here), and about Duncan's virtues is taken up under this head. Yet, Macbeth does seem to be “too full of the milk of human kindness,” as Lady Macbeth had told herself earlier. These decent moral sentiments, and his wish to enjoy the “golden opinions” coming from his recent accomplishments and honors, do not win out. They succumb to a combination of his own “vaulting ambition,” Lady Macbeth's attack on his manliness (through relentless accusations of cowardice), and her suggesting a way of pinning guilt for the murder on others (the guards). He is made ready to do what both religion and reason tell him is deeply wrong by her appeal to ambition, pursued with courage, as the most profound element of his nature as a man. No longer fearing detection or failure, they lose the last restraint on immoral conduct, and the process of murder begins (I, 7: 30-82).

Yet it would be wrong to think of Lady Macbeth, even then, as wholly without conscience. Someone wholly without conscience would not have to think of conscience—of the “compunctious visitings of nature”; someone utterly lacking in the gentleness of her sex would not have to ask to be “unsexed,” and for the milk in her breasts to be replaced by gall; someone unashamed of her deed would be willing to look upon it herself, and would not ask that it be hidden in night, darkened further by the smoke of hell, so that her “keen knife will not see the wound it makes,” nor heaven be able to see the act and call a stop to it. This impression is strengthened by small facts strewn along the way by Shakespeare. Watched with care, Lady Macbeth is first shown saying that the whole murder should be left to her, then that the two of them will do it, and finally arranging for Macbeth to do it alone, with only auxiliary help from her. As further extensions of the same pattern, we learn that she had to strengthen herself with some of the same wine she gave the guards, and that she would have killed Duncan herself when she went up to prepare the daggers for Macbeth “had he not resembled my father as he slept.” So all of Lady Macbeth's coldness before and immediately after the murder, her pedestrian literalness, her apparent firmness of purpose, her apparent firmness of purpose, hide another kind of element in her—gentler, weaker, conscious that the murder is a horrible deed, believing in the afterlife. Viewed in this light, her swooning at Macbeth's improvised slaying of the guards is much more likely to have been involuntary than deliberate. For a moment, after all the keyed-up effort and tension, it looked like the whole plan they had concerted would come crashing down. The swoon, rather than a sign of rational strength, is a small indication pointing in the direction of her later sleepwalking and suicide (I, 5: 53; I, 7: 69; II, 2: 1, 13-14).

We are not told what made Lady Macbeth so ambitious, but we do get some idea of what she and Macbeth looked forward to. Macbeth thinks about “the imperial theme” when he thinks of the kingship; his letter to his wife calls her “his dearest partner in greatness,” and speaks of the “greatness” promised her by the witches' prophecy, even though it can only be indirectly, since her name was never mentioned. As she sees it, the murder that night “shall to all our nights and days to come give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.” When Lady Macbeth persuades Macbeth to surrender his compunctions, she does not do so by magnifying his vision of what ruling would bring, but by castigating his inconsistency, his weakness in wanting it—which she
simply takes for granted—yet not being willing to do what is necessary to get it. Along the way, they say nothing about their children enjoying the succession, even though there are other allusions to children. Macbeth has asked Banquo, “Do you not hope your children shall be kings … ?” Lady Macbeth says, “I have given suck, and know how tender life ’tis to love the babe that milks me” (another sign she is gentler than she makes out). Macbeth tells her to “Bring forth men-children only.” But if any children have already come from this union, they have not survived, and others are not consciously anticipated or discussed by these peculiar would-be parents. The ambition motivating both Macbeths therefore seems primarily for themselves, and of very moderate, even ordinary, scope. They want to be king and queen in the way Duncan and his predecessors have been, want the power and the honor (not any increase in wealth), want to be the commanding force at the top—but that is all. They have no plans for conquest, or for domestic political changes; they have no past injustices or even slights to avenge. They certainly do not anticipate being involved in a series of grizzly murders: on the contrary, their notion seems to be that they will simply step into Duncan's shoes and rule in a most ordinary way—so weak are their powers of understanding and foresight (I, 3: 86, 117; I, 7: 54-55, 73-75. See also V, 2: 22-28).

We have no reason to believe Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to be anything but a loving couple, and, despite certain appearances, even to the end. The puzzle, however, is to explain their mutual attraction. Coriolanus was also an outstanding soldier, also a spirited and ambitious man, but his wife, Virgilia, was utterly unlike Lady Macbeth. She was the soul of gentleness, and meant to be quite different, in this respect, from the only other woman in Coriolanus' life, his mother Volumnia. Macbeth's marriage would be comparable to Coriolanus' choosing a mate modelled on his mother. This suggests a peculiar weakness in Macbeth, who too readily thinks of greatness as something that must be shared equally with his wife, perhaps because she possesses some element lacking in him. He may think of her as more realistic, of greater resolve, more daring, steadier. He certainly does not regard her as bringing to political rule the typically feminine virtues: on the contrary, he senses in her more of what he considers manliness—the manly virtues—than he possesses. This coincides with her conception of herself, as necessary to suppressing his weaker elements, only thereby enabling him to realize his potential for greatness. What he admires in her is strength in areas where he is weak, and vice versa: he could not rise to the heights without her, nor she without him.

We can only speculate whether Lady Macbeth became lividly ambitious because of not having children, or whether not having children—children who survived and grew up—was due to (or symbolic of) a masculinity in her that was already there, and that would have given any children of hers two fathers, rather than a father and a mother. Coriolanus and Virgilia have a small son. In Macbeth, Banquo has a son of some years, the Macduffs a small son and other children as well, and Duncan two older boys. The Macbeths' lack of issue is therefore far from incidental. Whatever its cause, it certainly helps to explain their capacity for subsequent acts of inhumanity. Duncan reminded Lady Macbeth of her father, which made it impossible to kill him. And, as Macduff later exclaims upon learning the fate of his family: “He has no children”—which, if it is a reference to Macbeth, probably means that Macbeth was able to kill mere children only because he had none himself (IV, 3: 216). Being a child tended by parents, and tending children of one's own, seem to strengthen the sense of moral limits or the natural conscience. In further support of this, Ross is portrayed as utterly without family—without father, mother, wife, children. And the witches, also without progenitors or progeny, have what moral feelings they possess only because they are, or regard themselves as, sisters.

While the Macbeths are very close—perhaps too close—prior to murdering Duncan, their paths immediately start to diverge once they are king and queen. Macbeth's thoughts are all on Banquo: “There’s none but he whose being I do fear,” both because of his “royalty of nature” and the witches' prophecy. That prophecy left Macbeth only “a barren sceptre” and therefore made his murder of Duncan, his sacrifice of “mine eternal jewel”—his soul—serve only “Banquo's issue.” After this reflection Macbeth consults and incites the two men he has chosen for murdering Banquo and Fleance. No longer is his conduct at least consonant with the prophecies, as in the case of Duncan's murder: he now tries to defy the prophecy for Banquo by making its fruition impossible. All this is done secretly, and without any prior discussion with Lady Macbeth. He had not
been frank with her about the prophecies originally, narrating only the favorable ones applying to him (and hence to her) while withholding Banquo's, which was unfavorable to them in the longer run. Tempted by the favorable good prospect, he might have thought he could overcome the unfavorable evil one. He would grasp the former first, and worry about the latter afterward.

Here we see him doing just that. But his separation from his wife involves more than simply planning an important operation without her: he becomes physically less available to her, compelling her practically to make an appointment to speak with him. Already, by this separation, and his giving himself (as she thinks) to fearful solitude, worrying still about the murder of Duncan, she begins to sense the happiness they both thought easily within their grasp slipping away:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nought's had, all's spent,} \\
\text{Where our desire is got without content.} \\
\text{‘Tis safer to be that which we destroy} \\
\text{Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy}
\end{align*}
\]

(III, 2: 4-8).

Her ensuing interview with Macbeth reads queerly. He speaks as if they are still in danger, as if they cannot eat without fear or sleep without “terrible dreams,” as if he is preoccupied not with Banquo's murder but with those who might be conspiring against the throne now, and as if the whole frame of things in this and the other life may need to be “disjointed” in order to free them from these fears. Nothing he says, of course, could possibly strike Lady Macbeth as being directed against Banquo. No names are named—he must speak vaguely—and if anything his remarks seem directed against Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain.

She tells him to be “bright and jovial among your guests tonight”; he tells her to give “eminence” with eye and tongue to Banquo, and then seems to return to the theme of their needing to flatter and disguise out of a fear for their safety. “You must leave this,” she says, probably not comprehending the drift of his remarks. Then: “O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!”—but the scorpions are horrible things that might kill others as well as fill Macbeth himself with loathing and fear. His addition, “Thou know’st that Banquo and his Fleance lives,” must have struck Lady Macbeth as quite irrelevant, and her reply, “But in them nature's copy's not eterne,” should not be read as extending to Macbeth a license to have them killed—certainly not now. Impressed, perhaps, by a strong note of concern in his voice, she may have wished to calm him, as if to say: “If ever they become worrisome to us, we know that they are not immortal, that things can happen to them.” Macbeth's rejoinder—that “they are assailable”—might have comforted him but certainly not her. His words start to become the poetry of death, and at her inquiry, “What’s to be done?”, he tells her to be “innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,” and continues to talk with funereal but poetic expectation.

The last times we see Lady Macbeth, prior to hearing about and then seeing her plight in Act V, are at and just after the banquet scene. Macbeth's vision of Banquo's ghost sitting in his place is the last such vision he will have. The scene starts off quietly enough, with Macbeth apparently in a good mood—probably because he expected good news about Banquo and Fleance, and perhaps also because he thought he had received some sign of acquiescence from the queen. The First Murderer reports: Banquo is dead, Fleance escaped. Suddenly, he sees Banquo sitting in his seat and is completely unnerved and terror-stricken: the murdered no longer stay put, as they had both before and after human laws were instituted to protect the common good. Lady Macbeth, of course, thinks his visions cowardly and womanly. She tells him to act like a man, which he says he would do in the face of any natural challenge from beast or man. After his guests leave, he shows what deeply worries him—that the universe is so made that it reveals, one way or another, the identity of secret murderers. The universe is on the side of the just! All the more startling, then, Macbeth's next thought, which concerns Macduff. Banquo's ghost has just scared the living daylights out of him, but his mind moves, by some spontaneous inner force, to the next possible source of opposition. He will send for Macduff and visit the
“weird sisters” to learn—what, he does not say. As we can now guess, and later discover, it is whether any evils will occur to him (that is, whether, unlike Duncan, he will die a natural death), and whether the prophecy about Banquo’s sons still holds. He will do anything now “for mine own good,” including murder after murder, so steeped in blood is he already (he does not mention again his lost soul). He has in mind “strange things” that will be acted upon without delay, without even being “scann’d.” He expects his strange “self-abuse” to cease as he grows inured to the doing of evil. This, not the sleep Lady Macbeth says he lacks and needs, will do away with his visions (III, 4: 128-44).

Lady Macbeth seems utterly unaware of their need to protect themselves; she simply wants to relax and enjoy sovereignty. Macbeth, on the other hand, is gripped by excessive insecurity. Having killed his own king, he seems deeply convinced that murderers cannot get away with their deeds, not only in the afterlife but in this life as well. He now engages in a struggle against this moral power of the universe, refusing to bow to it, and striking out against all he thinks might oppose him. His very courage leads him to rashness and cruelty, whereas less impulsiveness and greater understanding of the world would have made him solidify his position by acts of beneficence and justice. Macbeth is hardly a politic man. His successful and secret usurpation leads into tyranny, but he differs from the tyrant Socrates describes in The Republic. Macbeth is not dominated by erotic and other appetites aimed at uninhibited pleasure or gain. There is no riotous living. Only in ambition and fear does he seem excessive, and these, unguided by superior intellect, lead him to actions that make his ultimate success increasingly unlikely. By apparently guaranteeing him impunity, the witches only accelerate a tendency that was plainly in him before his second visit, just as their very first message to him only intensified an ambition that was already there.

Now for the end of this amazing and mystifying story. After her absence from all of Act IV, Lady Macbeth sweeps back into our purview most dramatically. Only her nighttime activity is disclosed, all of it done unconsciously, in sleep. Either she silently writes and seals a letter, or she walks with a light in her hand—a light she always has next to her. She is trying to rub out a spot on her hands, just as she had said a little water would wash off Duncan’s blood from her hands and Macbeth’s. But this blood will not wash off—and it is literally a “damned spot,” since it has helped land her in hell. The candle is meant to help her see through the murkiness of hell. And each utterance, in this marvellous reconstruction of her consciousness, is tied to a particular point in her experience, from the time Duncan was killed up to the recent past, when Macbeth was still fearing Banquo had emerged from his grave, and news of Lady Macduff’s murder had come to her ears. Quite properly, the doctor fears she may do harm to herself, and the next thing we hear is a wail of women, signifying the queen’s death.

The letter she writes in her sleep can only be to Macbeth, who has now undertaken the murder of Banquo and the Macduff family on his own, in a headlong rush he explains to no one. Would the letter simply ask to see him? Would it in any way express her deep confusion? The reason why Lady Macbeth thinks in unconnected pieces is that she believes herself lost and damned, yet without being able to understand how it has all happened. She is in utter misery and can only recollect points along the way. But, having importuned Macbeth to murder Duncan against his will, and having so often told him what to do in the course of that great action, she is in no position to criticize now. Nor will she complain of being left alone. Strong in the midst of her unhappiness, convinced it will not diminish, she will take the one way out available to her: suicide. At her own urging, Macbeth did indeed murder sleep, the “season of all natures”—her sleep.

That Macbeth still loves his wife is shown in his conversation with the doctor he has called in to observe her. He knows she has a “mind diseased,” and asks whether “ physic” or medicine can, with physical remedies, cure such a condition. Clearly he wishes deeply for her cure, but he is also preoccupied with the English forces coming to defeat him and place Malcolm on the throne. He has told himself the prophecies keep him secure and free of fear, but he is shaking inwardly with fear as he humiliates the messenger who comes to report the approach of the English army. And he admits to being entirely “sick at heart,” convinced that
My way of life
Is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud, but deep, mouth-honour, breath
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not

(V, 2: 22-28).

This is the most pathetic passage in the play. It shows how decent and ordinary were the ends Macbeth had sought to achieve through ambition, all unattainable because he had pursued his ambition through murder. It is amid this fear that he puts on his armor and takes it off again, and gives orders to “Hang those that talk of fear.”

A moment later, Macbeth hears a dreadful cry, and remarks that “I have almost forgot the taste of fears,” remembering how easily set off his fears used to be, and thinking he has gotten so used to plotting horrible murders that such cries can no longer startle him. Informed that it was the cry of women at the death of the queen, Macbeth says “She should have died hereafter; there would have been a time for such a word.” And this leads him into “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow”—the most memorable speech in the play by far. Macbeth has not forgotten the taste of fears: the cry fails to startle him because he is already brimming over with fear, a fear with a more obvious and pressing claim on his attention. His speech, it is true, says nothing directly about his wife, but this does not mean he feels nothing, or would not have had more to say (and think) had she died “hereafter”—that is, at a less frantic moment. But neither does he dwell upon himself or his present preoccupations. Instead, he gives voice to a reflection that covers them both, and all other men as well—or so his thinks. Tired, desperate, concealing both his sorrow and his fear, he seeks a vantage point external and superior to life's strivings.

Still, it is surprising that in a great speech at this point Macbeth does not reaffirm the moral nature of the universe—its finally detecting his wife and himself, gravely criminal, and meting out condign punishment. This would correspond to that deep strand in him that used to regard the world in this fashion. And we must also admit to something peculiar in the manner of his delivery, with its air of a set declamation. Macbeth's greatest stupidity, his greatest self-deception, one is tempted to say, comes in his finding the world, not his wife and himself, to blame. Life may be like a brief candle, but our tomorrows, todays, and yesterdays do not constitute a patternless sequence with no end but death. Just like his wife, Macbeth seems not to understand how what happened to them both could possibly happen. As several critics have remarked, his speech is to be read with the counterpart of the Bible in mind. It charges the Bible—the book that more than any other affirms the moral nature of the universe—with error. Replacing the Bible is an almost equally apodictic statement deposing the perfect God, and enthroning aimless idiocy as the ruling principle of the universe.

Those who find this great speech unsuitably pronounced by Macbeth, at this moment, are not entirely wrong. We should bear in mind, however, that the one person before whom it is delivered—Seyton—has certain unique characteristics. Seyton appears in only two scenes (3 and 5 of Act V) in the entire play. Before the former, no one knew Macbeth had an attendant or assistant by that name; in the latter, after announcing the death of the queen, he is heard from no more: following the “Tomorrow” speech, spoken, apparently, in his speechless presence, he completely disappears. When Macbeth first calls Seyton, he repeats his name three times within one speech, making sure the audience catches it. When he finally appears, he confirms the bad news about the coming of Malcolm and his English army. When Macbeth asks him for his armour—as if Seyton were also a kind of armour-bearer, a protector of the body—he asserts, rather pertly and knowingly: “‘Tis not needed yet.” In scene 5, when Macbeth hears what the stage direction calls “a cry of women within” and asks what that “noise” was, Seyton presently tells him: “The Queen, my lord, is dead.”
At this point the editors run into an obvious difficulty, for in the text no call is made for Seyton to go out, discover the queen to be dead, and return. Nor is he asked to do so by Macbeth, who, lost in a reverie about himself lasting seven lines, only then asks “Wherefore was that cry?” and receives Seyton's answer immediately. To make this answer physically possible, the editors add stage directions to the text calling for Seyton's exit after he says “It is the cry of women” and his reentrance just before Macbeth's “Wherefore was that cry?” But tinkering with the folio is always dangerous, as we have already seen with the character of Hecate, whom so many editors consider spurious and expendable. Here we must go by Shakespeare's mischievous indications and try to make sense of them. Seyton would not have to leave if he is Satan in disguise—a character with supernatural capacities, whose primary function in the play is witnessing and confirming the coming of evils. Without taking a step away, Satan knows the queen is dead. And after he hears the “Tomorrow” speech, he is gone—his function in the play ended. As something like an extension of Hecate and the witches, he is there to make sure that all—that is, all harm-doing—is going well.

Because of the presence of this unusual being, the “Tomorrow” speech may have to be interpreted in a special way. It is almost as if the view of life expressed in the speech must please Satan—as if the forces of harm and evil have no desire to make the world wholly evil, but are content if they can keep it from being understood as a moral place, directed by a good God. In reality, however, to convince men that “Life is a tale told by an idiot” is to disarm them utterly, and to make life itself impossible. It is, in fact, the view the forces of evil, by a stroke of genius, might have hit upon to harm men the most! So when Macbeth expresses this general conception, it is almost as if a mind not given to philosophizing suddenly sets forth a profound alternative to all religious and rational views of life. Considered from the standpoint of Macbeth's psychology, this view could only be the consequence of a mind fearing the existence of a good God, yet still unable to understand how two such criminals as himself and his wife come to the end they do. And the end comes soon enough for Macbeth. Sensing that he is doomed in body as well as soul, and despite learning of the witches' equivocation, earlier working in his favor but now against him, he fights on, lifting himself, by this courage, above the execrable and pathetic. Even when all is lost he refuses to bend or break.

Let us return to Freud's observation about the reversal of roles in Macbeth: Lady Macbeth goes from initial remorselessness to becoming “all remorse,” whereas Macbeth, who became “all defiance,” had earlier been filled with compunctions and fear. But does Lady Macbeth show remorse at the end? Keeping a light by her side is not remorse but fear. And when she is rubbing out the “damned” blood spots on her hand, or rueing the smell of blood on her “little” hand, what does she have in mind? At that point, her sigh—“oh, oh, oh!”—is taken by the doctor to mean that “the heart is sorely charged,” but, again, is it regret at actions that have led to deep disappointment and misery, or is it repentance, remorse at having done unjust and evil things? Her reference to her hand and her sigh may be evidence of femininity, gentleness, and moral conscience trying to express themselves, but such is the pride Lady Macbeth still takes in her masculinity, and in the hardness of her ambition, that she cannot openly acknowledge them. What she does is relive some of her own words and actions, particularly in connection with Duncan's murder, but all the while she senses herself damned in hell, undergoing punishment for her part in the murder, and trying desperately to undo the signs and symbols of her part in it. She undoubtedly connects her suffering with her crime, but of direct remorse, direct contrition, she gives no sign.

It is particularly remarkable how little of Macbeth's recent conduct, or of their recent relationship, is at the forefront of her mind. A word here about Lady Macduff, and there about Banquo, is all. Her present misery, the rupture in their closeness, are never mentioned directly. Her mind returns, again and again, to the past, to the words and deeds that set the awful train of events in motion. Nor can we presume that her daylight hours are free from care. After all, she keeps light by her continually—that is, day and night—and her suicide itself occurs during the day. But we learn directly of her nocturnal life alone. We gather from her gentlewoman's remarks that her nocturnal movements are repeated again and again, indicating that she is completely unable, on her own, to find a way out of her misery. Nor does her literal or pedestrian cast of mind alter at the end: the audience is aware of the symbolic importance of what she remembers, much of it having to do with how
easily involvement in a grave crime can be cleansed and forgotten. Still, her own awareness of this is at best subconscious, and her mind does not expand into ramifications of what she remembers: there are no reverberations of belief or sentiment even in the stricken Lady Macbeth.

Macbeth is quite different. Initially he experiences both compunctions and extravagantly fearful visions at the thought of murdering Duncan, and during the murder. But with Banquo and Macduff's family there are no compunctions, and his visions of the former's ghost is not repeated with the latter. Originally, Macbeth's fears, and to some extent his compunctions, were based on his religious belief—on the deep sense that the good God of the Bible protects the good and punishes the evil, and that the world as a whole hunts down murderers. As he moves successfully from murder to murder, with apparent impunity, he does become hardened. Considering himself irretrievably destined for hell, his compunctions disappear as his fear for his earthly security mounts. Nevertheless, we cannot say with Freud that he is “all defiance.” At the end, he is sick at heart about what his life has turned into, and while he does not complain of being separated from his wife, he remains deeply concerned about her health. Nor does his remark at learning of her death, and the ensuing “Tomorrow” speech, breathe defiance but, rather, an awareness of hopeless and contemptible unintelligibility. Only at the very end, when he knows he must die, is he defiant, spurning suicide and choosing to die in battle.

CHRISTIANITY AND ITS OPPOSITE

It is disconcerting to realize that Macbeth's Christian belief helps worsen his tyranny. Thinking himself already damned beyond redemption for murdering Duncan, fearing punishment here as well as in the afterlife, he plunges into a series of heinous murders he did not foresee originally. Having grown somewhat hardened to these crimes, he finds no security in them. Judging by the fears that continually agitate him during the day, his nights must be as miserable as his wife's: together they had indeed murdered their own sleep. And while she thinks of herself as already undergoing divine punishment in hell, he never ceases to anticipate a similar destiny for himself. Recognizing this, Macduff, at the very end, addresses him as “hell-bound,” and refers to the angel he has served—meaning the fallen angel, Satan. Jose Benardete argues that Macbeth's last words “Lay on, Macduff, and damn'd be him who first cries, 'Hold, enough!'” imply that Macbeth did not think of himself as necessarily damned by his murders, or at least thought that acts of courage or cowardice on his part could still be decisive in determining his eternal fate. While the words are subject to this interpretation, it does not jibe with Macbeth's actual outlook that day. He is filled with fear and foreboding, and neither speaks nor acts with the optimism this view of bravery and victory should instill in Scotland's greatest warrior. (See “Macbeth's Last Words” in Interpretation, Summer 1970, pp. 63-64.)

The importance of hell to the play had been prefigured in a very humorous scene some editors have also thought un-Shakespearean and sought to delete. It involves the famous knocking-at-the-gate, the dramatic effect of which De Quincey so admired. The scene occurs just after Duncan's murder, as Macduff and Lennox seek to enter the main part of the castle early that morning. The porter imagines himself the “porter of hell-gate,” and fancies himself answering, in the name of Beezlebub (and Lucifer), the knocks of those who deserve to sweat in hell. While the words are subject to this interpretation, it does not jibe with Macbeth's actual outlook that day. He is filled with fear and foreboding, and neither speaks nor acts with the optimism this view of bravery and victory should instill in Scotland's greatest warrior. (See “Macbeth's Last Words” in Interpretation, Summer 1970, pp. 63-64.)

The castle is too cold for hell, says the porter, but frigidity would not prevent it from being considered part of hell, as every reader of Dante's Inferno knows. There, in the ninth and deepest circle of hell, held by a frozen sea of ice, Lucifer is eternally fixed for his treason against God, and Judas, Brutus, and Cassius for like sins. Of course, what has just occurred in Macbeth's castle is an act of treasonous murder. The hell begun with that act in the castle may be said, in fact, to constitute one of the play's main themes, closely linked to its central issue of the intelligibility of life. But the hell Shakespeare describes is the natural hell to which these simpleminded murderers unknowingly bring themselves: their suffering, fear, and sleeplessness is their hell.
By all appearances, an equally irrelevant episode dealing with a related religious theme occurs toward the end of Act IV, and some editors retain it for reasons that, were they the only ones, would hardly suffice. Macduff had just tried to persuade Malcolm to return to Scotland and save it from Macbeth's tyranny. Testing him, Malcolm claims to be a very vicious man himself—lecherous, avaricious, with none of the virtues, and eager to

\[
\text{Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell,} \\
\text{Uproar the universal peace, confound} \\
\text{All unity on earth.}
\]

Somewhat strangely, Macduff is willing to accommodate the first two of these vices, but he gives vent to anger and despair at the rest, and perhaps particularly at the last. Finding Malcolm so “accurs’d,” he compares him with his parents:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Thy royal father} \\
\text{Was a most sainted king; the queen that bore thee,} \\
\text{Oftener upon her knees than on her feet,} \\
\text{Died every day that she liv’d. Fare thee well!} \\
\text{These evils thou repeat’st upon thyself} \\
\text{Hath banish’d me from Scotland.}
\end{align*}
\]

That Macduff is a deeply Christian man is again shown by these lines. Concord, universal peace, the unity of mankind are living ideals for him—however little realized in practical political life. And the queen's spending her days on her knees, and dying every day, the thane of Fife considers great virtues. His despair comes from thinking that the evils of Macbeth have counterpart evils in Malcolm, and that Scotland is doomed to suffer on interminably.

This induces Malcolm to reveal that he spoke as he did to test Macduff and make sure he had not been sent by Macbeth. No doubt with some exaggeration, Malcolm now denies he has the vices to which he had so vehemently confessed and lays claim instead to their opposite virtues. He adds that Siward was on the point of leading ten thousand Englishmen against Macbeth, but now they will all return together, hoping “the chance of goodness” being achieved is as great as their quarrel with Macbeth is warranted. At this point in the final scene of Act IV a doctor enters—the first to show himself in the play, and very soon to be succeeded, at the beginning of Act V, by the doctor in attendance on Lady Macbeth. After the brief incident with the English doctor is concluded, none other than the ever-gentle (the ever-evil) Ross arrives. What happens during this brief interlude with the doctor? Malcolm asks whether the English king will come forth, once he is finished curing a “crew of wretched souls,” whose malady defeats the medical art, but quickly amends at his touch—“Such sanctity hath Heaven given his hand.”

We are not told, of course, what a doctor was doing there if the king's touch had such efficacy: perhaps the testimony of a doctor to the superiority of supernatural (to natural) capacities serves as the most effective of all testimonies. The doctor departs, leaving Malcolm to explain to Macduff that the disease the king cures is called “the evil,” and that he has seen the king work these miracles with his own eyes. Malcolm does not know how the king gets heaven's help, but he cures people with sickly and deformed bodies by “hanging a golden stamp about their necks” and pronouncing certain “holy prayers.” This “healing benediction,” says Malcolm, is rumored to be a legacy the king will leave to his successors. He also has a “gift of prophecy,” and is shown to be “full of grace” by “sundry blessings” that “hang about his throne.” Toward the very end of the scene, after the exchange with Ross, Malcolm is still intent on seeing the English king, but not to ask for his “healing benediction,” or to solicit his “gift of prophecy.” It is to bid farewell and then march on Macbeth with the help of the English army the king has provided.

Nothing in a Shakespearean play is irrelevant to its central theme, and here the relevancy lies almost at the
surface. How is human evil (symbolized by a disease called “the evil”) to be cured? By his actions, Malcolm makes it clear that he will not depend on Christian prayers, love, or miracles. The evil of Macbeth must be fought against, outsmarted, overpowered, and only in this way can it be eradicated and the good established in its place. Another variation on the same theme occurs later when the besieged Macbeth asks his doctor “What rhubarb, senna, or what purgative drug, would scour these English hence?” (V, 3: 54-55) Just as it is absurd to purge military evils by medical drugs, so is it absurd to purge political evils by either medical drugs or religious rites. Politics may benefit from widespread religious belief, but only if that belief permits the political art to cope with political evils as part of the natural world in the broad sense of the term. Macduff is pictured by Shakespeare as having false and dangerous confidence in God's interventions, much in the spirit of Malcolm's mother. But Malcolm himself is wary, distrustful, sober. He directly asks Macduff, “Why in that raveness left you wife and child, those precious motives, those strong knots of love, without leave-taking?”—referring to his having hurriedly abandoned them to the “ravness” of Macbeth (IV, 3: 24-28). Yet while Malcolm will not solicit secret prayers and amulets from the English king, and sees the political danger of Macduff's piety, he is not above playing on that piety. He adroitly makes himself seem, in Macduff's eyes, to be a wholehearted believer in the practices of the English king, and therefore a fit successor to his own “sainted” father and kneeling mother.

After the final scene in England, at the end of Act IV, we are shown Malcolm in Scotland four brief times. Three of these are in battlefield scenes, the fourth in the finale. In the first, he orders the army to deceive the enemy about its numbers by camouflaging themselves with branches cut from Birnam Wood. In the second, he sends Old and Young Siward into the vanguard of the battle, keeping back with his fellow Scotsman, Macduff. The third occurs after Macduff goes off hunting for Macbeth, with Malcolm learning from Old Siward that the castle has been surrendered, and that they have been assisted by the thanes and many of Macbeth's own people. At no point is there any sign that Malcolm himself entered the battle: he seems to have remembered full well the occasion with which the play began, when he was almost captured by the enemy. So Malcolm's contribution to Scotland will not consist in abilities of the sort Macbeth and Macduff preeminently possess. He will be a smarter, less superstitious leader than them both. He will need all his wariness, since his first act—one of beneficence as compared to Macbeth's murder of Banquo—is to reward his thanes by making them all earls, including Ross. Yet Ross may not have escaped completely, for Malcolm intends not only to call home exiled friends (he does not mention his brother by name) but also to find and punish the “cruel ministers” of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. And in a final contrast to Macbeth and Macduff again, he vows that, whatever else is needful, “by the grace of Grace”—that is, apparently by God but in fact by his own resources, his own acumen—he will perform “in measure, time, and place.” The firstlings of his heart will not, like Macbeth's, be the firstlings of his hand, and he will not be as impetuous and trusting as he knows Macduff to have been.

Macbeth may be said to be a play about two defective extremes of evil, one “masculine,” one “feminine,” and its setting is most suitable to this purpose. Eleventh-century Scotland contains two powerful and mutually antagonistic elements: a feudal aristocracy, devoted to the virtues of courage and manliness, best shown in war, and the Christianity in which the nobles believe, with its absolute demand for love and peace. As a practical matter it might seem that the former needed the restraint of the latter—that warlike thanes would be constantly in revolt against their king, and in contention with themselves, were it not for the influence of Christianity. It was Christianity that made them regard their king as the vicar of God, and themselves as fellow believers in Christ. In the play, obedience to Duncan is plainly strengthened by the Christian belief of men like Macduff, who refers to the murdered king as “the Lord's anointed temple.”

Macbeth, who begins by killing the rebel, Macdonwald, and then himself rebels against Duncan, is moved to this act by Lady Macbeth's appeal to his valor and manliness, traits on which she prides herself above all. The question as to whether this manliness—connected to war, ambition, mastery, the love of superiority and honor—is the highest good, or is itself subordinate to the virtue of justice, keeps animating events in the play. Excessive manliness occurs when the ends and qualities of manliness are made to rise superior to all. Not only
does it show itself in the Macbeths, but also in Old Siward, who is perfectly happy to lose a son who has died bravely, and even in Macduff, who refuses to cry at the news of his family's murder, and whom Malcolm somewhat unsympathetically tries to goad into manly action against Macbeth.

Almost equally dangerous to human life is the opposite extreme, which denies the difference between friends and enemies, and exhorts men to love all men as they love and trust the good God. Warned about her imminent murder, Lady Macduff first asks why she should flee if she has done no harm, and then berates herself for having used this false “womanly defence.” But it is her husband, Macduff, who much more than she embodies trust in God for the protection of good human beings. Neither Macbeth's excessive manliness, nor Macduff's excessive womanliness, can form the basis of human society (compare Jose Benardete's account of these opposites, op. cit., p. 68). The former turns everyone into enemies and leaves no room for friendship—for the concord of good people in a body politic. The latter turns everyone into friends and offers no protection against enemies, internal or external, again subverting the body politic.

In the play these defective views of human life seem to be associated with opposite views of the universe at large. One is expressed by Macbeth in the form of “Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,” but it is also related to an older view, first formulated by the pre-Socratic philosopher, Heracleitus, according to which “War is the father of all things.” Heracleitus generalizes into the first cause of everything the contention and vying for mastery that are characteristic of warring men. Nothing is simply at rest or in harmony. All states of seeming concord and rest are only temporary phases—the resultants of clash themselves—in a never-ending sea of change. The difficulties with Heracleitus' view, so much at odds with the rule of mind in Anaxagoras, and the self-sufficiency of being in Parmenides, received much attention from Plato and Aristotle. It cannot account for the coherence of individuals or species, for the causal interconnection of things, for the existence of human knowledge, or for the range of beings in the universe. Even while granting the existence of individuals, it cannot allow for their holding together, for the persistence of any classes, unities, or wholes, or for any transcendence of the flux whatsoever. Its defect comes from its very simplicity. It says war is the father of all things, not the partial cause of all or some things. Its whole intention is to make war the cause of things it does not seem to be the cause of—to make it the supreme and sole cause. And not the least of its weaknesses is its inability to account for itself as an eternally true and universal thought about flux in a world of flux.

By having Macbeth compare life to the unintelligible sound and fury of an idiot, Shakespeare takes Heracleitus' thought to its logical conclusion. He seems to have realized that the very idea of nature—of kinds of things and their necessary developments—could not be sustained on the basis of a philosophy of total flux: Heracleitus' natural philosophy destroys nature. In this respect, Christianity may at first seem to be the very opposite of Heracleitus. It considers the universe an essential harmony and even unity founded in the good will of God. But if nothing happens without God's active will and its imperative for ultimate good, Christianity and Heracleitus may in fact have something in common. Heracleitus' view, taken full strength, would deprive human life of its nature and render it unintelligible sound and fury: nothing makes life exist or change in ascertainable ways; nothing holds it together. But from the Christian view as well the world, constantly subject to God's exercise of his will and miraculous power, is undetermined by anything like the independent natures of things. Both views make nature in its original and proper sense impossible.

Everything in Macbeth is bound by the natures of things (and by chance). Even Hecate and the witches have a nature they are bound by—a nature filled, perhaps, with mutually inconsistent elements and therefore physically impossible, but a nature imagined, nonetheless. Not that the working out of the natures, particularly in the case of man, is simple. Over and above the general, sexual, and individual parts of our nature, we are affected by life in society, and particularly by the high commanding voices of politics and religion. To such causes must be added the range of invention and choice available to each of us, along with the mind's unique ability to control its face and hide its purpose. The consequence is an amazing complexity of human affairs, where motives, actions, and plans are frequently concealed, and where idiotic chaos might appear to rule
rather than intelligible causes of any kind. This is why the play is filled with mysteries of fact and cause, and
the hovering presence of the witches almost prepares us for such a world. Nevertheless, on closer scrutiny, the
mysteries vanish. We can discover Duncan's good plan and see why it failed; we see why the unsound plan to
to kill him happened to succeed. We can guess why Banquo had to take his trip. We are no longer mystified by
Ross' descent from the level of the royal bedchambers, by his remaining outside the castle, by his appearance
at Lady Macbeth's castle and soon afterward in England, by his return with the invading forces, his
disappearance in the subsequent battle, and his reappearance among the thanes at their final elevation to
earloms.

Shakespeare is also interested in determining the place of reason within human nature, and the extent to which
it guides human conduct. This is why the play gives much more prominence to involuntary visions, incoherent
sleep-talking, impulses, and passions that reason does not master than it does to deliberate planning. By
having Macbeth degenerate to the point where his impulses become the basis for action, untested and
undirected by reflection, he brings life as close as it can to the behavior of an idiot. The witches at the
outset prefigured much of this irrational impulsiveness, and no better symbol of the return to a more
completely human life can be found than Malcolm's accession to the throne. With him comes not only an
avoidance of the extremes of both masculinity and femininity but a restoration of rational calculation and
deliberateness dedicated to the common good—in short, of justice under the direction of prudence. Malcolm
will not make the mistake made by the obviously Christian "Old Man" when he says to the departing Ross,
"God's benison go with you; and with those that would make good of bad, and friend of foes!" (II, 4, at the
end)—a lesson in benignity that can only feed the malignity of the morally worst character in the play.
Malcolm will not follow excessive masculinity in making foes of friends, nor excessive femininity in making
friends of foes.

Of course Shakespeare is particularly anxious to trace the causal lines that bring Macbeth and Lady Macbeth
to their surprising fates. Quite clearly the witches do not put ambition into these would-be murderers but play
upon an ambition already there, promising it success, and later assuring Macbeth that he cannot be conquered
or killed. As a general matter, they facilitate courses of action already prepared for in the souls of men by
removing obstacles to their success, and in this respect function very much like the ring of Gyges in Plato's
Republic (Book II, 359-61). But all the while, hidden from their own eyes, the characters and circumstances of
Macbeth and his wife are at work, leading them to their peculiar and separate dooms. And it all happens
within a span of time compressed even further by Shakespeare's dramatic art, with indications given in
speeches that unnaturally accelerate a process already unnaturally accelerated by the witches' guarantees of
success and security. It would be easy to conclude that this is what happens to murderers: God catches up with
them and punishes their crimes. And the confidence that such is the case may be politically salutary. But the
real fate of the Macbeths is entirely natural, just like that of the Macduffs. It stems from the fixed nature of
things, and not essentially from accident or external supernatural intervention of any sort, demonic or divine.

GOOD AND EVIL

Despite the optimism associated with Malcolm's final accession to the throne, the atmosphere of Macbeth is
generally dark, repellent, threatening. This effect is achieved by an unnatural poetic exaggeration,
emphasizing those elements of reality most in keeping with the problem of the play, and omitting those that
would point in other directions. The sunlight, summer, flowers, plain enjoyment of life, jocularity, even the
use of moonlight for romantic associations that color so many other plays are for the most part absent from
this one. Instead, we have fog, darkness, blood, and foreboding. The witches embody the subject by their
visible ugliness and their proclivity to harm. They also combine unnaturally, and therefore confuse, not only
masculinity and femininity but old age and childishness, purpose and purposelessness, even a kind of wisdom
and folly. When they receive Macbeth's visit much later in the play, a palpable magnification of their
connection with the humanly repellent occurs. Hecate is certainly quite matter-of-fact in her approach to their
art, but once she steps in the results are much more powerful than in Act I. And as the witches add to their
cauldron the parts of so many abhorrent things, we can see the kinship these things have with the Macbeths themselves, whose distortion of their own nature makes them frightful and horrifying to behold.

What bearing does the existence of so much that is abhorrent have on the nature of the universe? Why are abhorrent human beings possible? Clearly, the universe is not simply the theater or home of human happiness, and many beings exist despite the fact that man fears and detests them. Nevertheless, like man's potential for good, the many splendid things in the universe—the ones understated in this play—may not be available without allowing for those that repel as well. In a material world, a world of separate beings and classes of beings, the possibility of harm and evil derives inevitably from the presence of benefit and good, and the good of some things will be the harm of others. To ask for a world in which all men are always rational, always in control of their passions and appetites, never errant, is to ask for a world that is physically impossible. To ask for a world filled only with things attractive and beneficial to man—for cows and dogs but not rats, for health but not disease, for growth but not decay—is also to ask the impossible. Moreover, man has a natural place in this world. While sharing characteristics, moral and physical, with various parts and gradations of the world, he also adds something necessary to its completion. Without him the world would lie there unknown, uncelebrated, unrhymed; and poets, like philosophers, would never be called upon (with Hecate) “to show the glory of our art.”

That the Macbeths meet with such bad endings seems to prove the world emphatically moral, but it does not. If the world were good in a simple and unqualified way, the Macbeths could not have gone wrong in the first place. And while it may be said that Banquo's conniving in Macbeth's crime made him deserve a punishment almost as serious as the harm he receives from Macbeth, the same cannot be said of Lady Macduff and her children. They prove that some good people perish solely through the evil of others, and the example of Ross shows that some evil people are never punished for their evil. So evil—human evil—is a permanent feature of the human world. Nor is an abhorrence of even the worst evil-doing—a conscience—to be found in all human beings, though it is most unusual to find it completely lacking. Shakespeare seems to associate the growth of conscience in us with family upbringing—Lady Macbeth finds she cannot kill Duncan because he reminds her of her father. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth both do what they do despite their consciences: the former knows murder is a crime that God and human societies have always condemned most strongly, and the latter refers to ambition's need for such instruments as an “illness.” Only Ross is the kind of man likely to have no conscience or contrition, and we know less about him than we do about Richard III and Iago, his greater but less successful peers in evil-doing.

But what is this evil of which we speak? Do evil men have a conscious will to do evil for its own sake? Are they lovers of harm rather than good? In the case of the Macbeths, evil is not sought for itself. They commit murder not because they enjoy slaughter but because they are willing to do something wrong in order to achieve something they know to be good. The goods they seek are all too ordinary: to rule, to be admired and loved. Even in the case of Macbeth's most irrational undertaking—the Macduff family murders—his motives, while far from clear, do not include any kind of sadism. He expresses no reasons, not even any wish to strike at Macduff in some way, or to warn others against deserting to Malcolm. From his failing to act instantly against Macduff he has concluded that he must in the future act on impulse rather than on slower-moving reflection if he is to prevail. We must imagine that Ross himself probably enjoys his superior ability to deceive and defeat more than the pain of those he hurts: in short, human evil is primarily the consequence of seeking some good at the cost of harming others, whether the good is sovereignty, superiority, or any of many other goals that entice men. What defects of upbringing or nature could bring a Ross to be what he is we can only guess. Nor does this play contain any direct evidence (as The Tempest does, for example) of a way of life—philosophical or poetical—rising superior to politics per se and making the soul essentially gentle rather than rough. The closest to this, in the play, is Hecate's devotion to the excellence of her craft—the craft of contriving harm. Hecate speaks in rhymed couplets, as if to remind us of the kinship between her mastery of “charms”—using combinations of words and apparitions—and the poetic art. (See III, 5, and IV, I, where the witches do Hecate's bidding and receive her praise.)
This dependence of harm on good accounts for the peculiar work and character of Hecate and her witches, for there is nothing satanic about them, not even the slightest sign of an urge to do evil for the sake of evil. Is arranging Macbeth's doom on a par for the witches with cherishing a pilot's thumb? Hecate's motive seems to be her art or craft itself: paradoxically, it is only her love of excellence that makes her enjoy the contrivance of harm, for no other motive for her activity is ever given. Shakespeare never ascribes either to her or the witches any need of their own nature requiring them to bring harm to others. It is false, moreover, to consider harm an independent and separate element in the universe. By nature men seek only good, and it is their limited intelligence and their passions that cause them to do harm. They rarely understand what is really good in general or for themselves in particular, and often miscalculate the actual consequences of their actions. They are not so solicitous of the well-being of others as to avoid harming them if an important benefit to themselves is at stake. These characteristics often cause men to engage in acts of grave injustice that bring grave harm to themselves as well. Exaggerated, magnified, and compressed for dramatic effect, this is certainly the most obvious moral lesson of Macbeth.

If we put together what the play divulges directly with what it consciously keeps from our view, the world is not the dark place it seems, and certainly not unintelligible. It is intelligible because the natures of the things in it are, and must be, intelligible. With its amazing array of beings, culminating in man, it is even the kind of world reason would choose, given what is possible. It contains ugliness because it also contains beauty, baseness because it also contains nobility, evil because it also contains good. But it is far from a moral order in the simple sense, where forces internal or external to it guarantee the flourishing of good and the failure of evil. Life is not a tale told by an idiot, but neither is it a parable told by a perfectly good and all-powerful God. It is a dangerous place for men, who are subject not only to natural perils but to those deriving from themselves. All too readily tempted into distortions of their nature and harboring false or imperfect notions of good, they are the source of their own greatest misery. Political, religious, and social institutions can do much for them, but they may also do harm, and, like all other things, are subject to decay. Human happiness is therefore very difficult to achieve, and even modest contentment may not easily be within man's grasp. At the end of the play Malcolm returns to a wise and just course, but we are never told what it is in Malcolm that will resist temptations and hold him to this course.

The darker side of life does not seem to have embittered Shakespeare, despite his having had as full a view of it as anyone can have. He seems to have concluded, as a general matter, that good is more fundamental than evil in the world, whatever the practical difficulties in the way of realizing it, and however great the actual predominance of evil. From this came the composure making it possible for him to write both tragedy and comedy, and even to commingle them appropriately. And his confidence in the good must have been confirmed, or given its highest expression, in his own philosophizing and poetry, which perhaps more than anything else show man's connection with the divine. If Macbeth's great “Tomorrow” speech expresses the deepest pessimism, the conclusion to which Shakespeare himself points in this play mixes pessimism with a more fundamental optimism.

**Criticism: Ethics And Political Ideology: Donald W. Foster (essay date 1986)**


*[In the following essay, Foster offers an account of Macbeth in the context of Jacobean politics and history.]*

James I, in his preface to the *Basilikon Doron* (1603), notes that men must “be very warie in all their secretest actions, and whatsoever middesses they vse for attaining to their most wished ends.” This is especially true, he says, in the affairs of kings:
for Kings being publike persons, by reason of their office and authority, are as it were set (as it was said of old) vpon a publike stage, in the sight of all the people; where all the beholders eyes are attentiuely bent to looke and pry in the least circumstance of their secretest drifts: Which should make Kings the more careful not to harbour the secretest thought in their minde ... assuring themselves that Time the mother of Veritie, will in the due season bring her owne daughter to perfection.¹

We have no record of James's critical response to Macbeth, but there are many who would applaud his meditation on the old figure of the “player-king” as a commentary on Shakespeare's Scottish tragedy: Truth, the daughter of Time, has at last a coming-out party in Act V, as riddling prophecies are unravelled, and as King Macbeth, “the secretest man of blood,” is shown to his countrymen for what he is, a fiendlike butcher, so unlike his spiritual opposite, that most sainted prince, young Malcolm.² The sin, disease, chaos, and falsehood of Macbeth find their answer in Malcolm's piety, medicine, order, and truth. Macbeth, like those nineteenth-century French narratives discussed by Roland Barthes, raises “the question as if it were a subject which one delays predicating; and when the predicate (truth) arrives, the sentence, the narrative, are over, the world is adjectivized (after we had feared it would not be).” In short, Shakespeare in his Scottish play poses a problem and solves it, producing thereby a drama which follows Barthes' “classic” narrative pattern: “Truth, these narratives tell us, is what is at the end of expectation. This design brings narrative very close to the rite of initiation (a long path marked with pitfalls, obscurities, stops, suddenly comes out in the light); it implies a return to order, for expectation is a disorder.”³ This, some would say, is no less true of the disorder in Macbeth's Scotland than of the narrative's own “disorder” of expectation. In fact, the expectation of order is so strong at the close of Macbeth that critics for years have out-Malcolm'd Malcolm in their expressions of a beatific future. “Blood will cease to flow,” writes one, “movement will recommence, fear will be forgotten, sleep will season every life, and the seeds of life will blossom in due order.” “Virtue and justice are restored,” exclaims another. “The time is free, the ‘weal’ once more made ‘gentle.’” “The true cosmic playwright”—God—“now controls the world stage,” writes a third, “and is prepared to create pattern out of the chaos and significance out of Malcolm's victory. ...” “No longer will innocent flowers shelter serpents,” writes a fourth. “Appearances will be attuned again with reality. ... Macbeth's reign becomes the memory of a nightmare, scarcely disturbing Scotland's serene future.”⁴ All will be performed in measure, time, and place.

I

What interests me is not so much whether these critics are right or wrong in their unequivocal prophecies of bliss, but that such prophecies are made at all. It is not that I fault them for speaking of Malcolm and Macduff and company as “real” people with a “real” future, for insofar as the text comments on a past or future beyond the confines of narrative time, it is our business to discuss it as part of the fiction, as an inherent part of what defines the world of Macbeth. But it is curious that the criticism, until very recently, has been so unanimous in its expectation of a return to order after Macbeth's demise. For how can we know, finally, what sort of world it is that Malcolm's Scotland has inherited? We have, of course, the testimony of Macduff that the “time is free,” which is perhaps the most oft-quoted line from the play outside Macbeth's “tomorrow” soliloquy; and most have taken his word as gospel, assuming either that Macduff is a man of astute judgment, or else that his words have a kind of magical efficacy in defining his world's future. Yet Macduff is the man who fled to England to escape Macbeth's bloody sword, while trusting his wife and children to the power of positive thinking; and though he declares that the time is free, he does so in a play in which the “good” characters are marked by their signal inability to learn from their mistakes. His declaration carries no greater freight of truth than Duncan's announcement in 1.2 that the Thane of Cawdor shall never more deceive his bosom interest.

From the play's opening line, the text glances repeatedly at Scotland's troubled future, as the natural harvest and inevitable repetition of a troubled past. In Malcolm we are presented with a future king whose speech—beginning with his self-impeachment (the only lie ever told by this “weak, poor, innocent lamb”), or perhaps even with his odd response to the news of his father's murder (“O, by whom?”)—displays nothing but
an empty bosom, a cunning mind, and a ready tongue. And though we are not told which of the two princes laughed in his sleep as Duncan bled, in the end it makes no difference, for at the close revenges still burn in men, and it is “certain” that Donalbain is not with his brother (5.2.7-8). In fact, his conspicuous and pointed absence in the fifth act (by which Shakespeare refers his audience to Holinshed’s familiar chronicles) might well prompt Malcolm to say of Donalbain what Macbeth once said of Fleance: his absence is material. Holinshed reports that Malcolm eventually died a gruesome death, his head skewered through the eye upon the spear of an English knight; after which Donalbain returned from Ireland, slew Malcolm’s eldest son, and usurped the throne. Moreover, during Malcolm’s reign, “all the laws that Makbeth had ordeigned were abrogated”; the whole realm was given over to “intestine rebellion,” “slaughter in all parts,” “more crueltie than euer had beehe heard of before,” “discomfitie and decaie,” “outragious riot,” “licorous desires,” “corrupted abuses,” “riotous manners,” and “superfluous gormandizing.” If art in this case imitates a life, Malcolm’s crafty false-speaking against himself is only too true.

Nor can there be a “return” to order when there was none to begin with. We are given no hint in Shakespeare that Duncan’s reign was ever anything but bloody and chaotic. Indeed, the King’s opening question, “What bloody man is that,” might well be answered, “a Scotsman.” Word of rebellion, treason, betrayal, and killing come post with post, without so much as breathing space between. An ineffectual king, Duncan can do nothing but inquire after “the newest state” of a broil which seems to have no beginning or end. And insofar as the three weird sisters represent the forces of darkness, the first line of the play—“Where shall we three meet again”—suggests already that what we shall see on the heath, or stage, is a repetition, more of the same.

That Macbeth follows a narrative curve from order/goodness/truth to chaos/badness/falsehood and back again is the illusion of those who would have their drama serve, not as a metaphor for life (in which our search for a first cause or grammatical subject drives us ever into the dark backward and abyss of time), but rather as a metaphor for some fictive or dream reality that has, in fact, a beginning, middle, and end: that is, a neatly contained world without causality or transience. In this respect, the reader’s demand for a narrative based on the diad of subject and predicate, noun and verb, on expectation and desire for its imminent closure, is kin to the old cry for “poetic justice,” for it demands that the poet belie his world in the interest of the reader’s metaphysical comfort. In the end, of course, all poets, all tests, do belie life; but the old demand for hermeneutic narrative, in which “truth” predicates an incomplete subject, is the demand for a conventional lie, the expected lie, linked, as Barthes would say, “to the kerygmatic civilization of meaning and truth, appeal and fulfillment.”

In Macbeth the predicate, as truth, never arrives; nor is the world adjectivized, except by characters within the fiction, all of whom are partial to the action, and hence, unreliable judges. Shakespeare never essays to articulate the truth of Macbeth’s history, nor even offers us a sum of perspectives which, when viewed holistically, comprise the truth. What we get instead is a variety of conflicting interpretations expressed by figures who themselves exist (until our imagination amends them) only as interpretation, as words in a text. “Some say he’s mad; others, that lesser hate him, / Do call it valiant fury” (5.2.13-14). It is impossible to say, finally, whether Macbeth is aptly named “coward” or “brave,” “Bellona’s bridegroom” or “bloody villain,” “royal lord” or “dwarfish thief,” “Majesty” or “monster,” “something wicked” or “angry god,” “noble partner” or “abhorred tyrant.” Even the adjectives most frequently used to describe him—“good” (ten times) and “worthy” (nine times)—are neither true nor false, for all such words refer us not to any external reality but only to the figures who voice them, even as Macduff’s “time is free” directs us not to truth, but to an interpretation, that is, to Macduff’s own vision of a redeemed future, and to his sense that time past has been chained, hampered, enthralled by that cruel tyrant whose head is now mounted on a stick. Were the detached head able to speak in the final scene, it would, no doubt, say it was the other way around, that time was the tyrant, Macbeth time’s fool and slave.

But if the passage of time in Macbeth fails to bring truth to perfection, the language of time may at least serve as a vantage from which to gain a new perspective: for time, in Macbeth, is the mother of many words. Nearly
everyone is heard to “pay his breath to time” (4.1.99), from the lordly Malcolm to the lowly porter. Predictably, all this talk of time has generated a good deal of critical discussion as well; but according to the orthodox consensus (in essays by Stephen Spender, Roy Walker, Barbara Parker, Fred Turner, Ricardo Quinones, Francois Maguin, and Wylie Sypher, among others), this textual preoccupation with time and time's laws only serves to confirm Macbeth as a “closed” play (Sypher's term) in which the untimely Macbeths knock the time out of joint only to have the Malcolm-Macduff-Nature team knock it back in. As articulated by Frank Kermode, “The suffering of the Macbeths may be thought of as caused by the pressure of the world of order slowly resuming its true shape and crushing them. This is the work of time; as usual in Shakespeare, evil, however great, burns itself out, and time is the servant of providence. Nowhere is this clearer than in Macbeth. The damnation of the principal characters involves murder and destruction, outrage not only upon the state but upon the whole cosmos; but the balance is restored.” Kermode goes on to survey the numerous references in Macbeth to time and time's laws, and concludes, “As in Spenser, Time, apparently the destroyer, is the redeemer; yet it is itself redeemed. It seems very characteristic … of Shakespeare that there should be, in the greatest of the plays about human guilt, these semantic complexities concerning time, the element in which human life succeeds or fails, in which virtue is tested and evil brought to good.”

Thus Macbeth’s true history, which begins with a capital crime, ends (to use a figure from Othello), in a “bloody period.” Be sure your disorders will find you out.

But when hermetic abstractions of Time-as-redeemer are set aside long enough for us to look at the actual language used, we find that Macbeth is plagued by a persistent though largely unconscious impulse to take revenge on time itself, as the chief obstacle to the human will, as the very devil from which man must be redeemed. Perhaps the most famous (though by no means original) formulation of his dilemma is that expressed by Nietzsche's Zarathustra:

‘It was’—that is the name of the will's teeth-gnashing and most lonely affliction. Impotent against what is transpired, the will is a resentful spectator of all that has passed.

The will cannot will backwards; that it cannot break time and time's covetousness—that is the will's loneliest affliction.

But this passage is often misunderstood. The human will does not resent simply the “what was” of time, or the past. Time exists as past, present, and future, and contains not only an “it was” but an “it is” and an “it shall be.” By stressing the “it was” as the object of the will's resentment, Nietzsche is concerned not merely with time past, but with time passing, with transience. The past bears the brunt of the will's resentment only because the past most obviously is ground whereon the will cannot operate. That which has come before cannot be changed or recreated in any literal sense. Therefore, having stumbled over this immovable rock, the will yields to a counter-will, a willing-against, an impulse to “get even.” All sentiment becomes ressentiment. Seeking to liberate itself from its chains, the resentful will lashes out against time and time's laws, sometimes in foolish ways:

Alas, every prisoner becomes a fool! The imprisoned will, too, releases itself in a foolish way.

It is resentful that time does not run back. ... And so, out of rage and ill-temper, the will rolls stones about, taking revenge on him who does not, like it, feel rage and ill-temper.

Thus the liberating will becomes a felon, and upon all that can suffer it wreaks revenge for its inability to go backwards.

This, yea, this alone is revenge itself: the will's aversion to time and time's “It was.”
Shakespeare's Troilus, in speaking of love, observes “that the will is infinite and the execution confined, that the desire is boundless and the act a slave to limit” (*T&C*, 3.2.80-82). Substitute the will to power for the sex drive, and we have the problem of *Macbeth*. Here is the figure of an infinite will trapped in a finite, transient body. The driving force behind Macbeth is not just a petty ambition to be named King of Scotland, but a far more radical impulse to be King over life itself, as indicated by his verbal obsession with time, causality, and transience. Macbeth would “entreat an hour to serve” his will, rather than vice versa (2.1.22). But for time's inexorable laws, his will “had else been perfect, / Whole as marble, founded as the rock. / As broad and general as the casing air.” Instead he finds his will “cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in,” (3.4.25), “the servant to defect, / Which else should free have wrought” (2.1.17-18). Unable to stem the flow of time, or to clip the chains of causality, unable to alter or recover that which time has established as the order of accomplished fact, Macbeth feels compelled to express his resentment in acts of bloody execution.

Macbeth's rage against time, like his impulse to murder Duncan, lies hidden until that fateful meeting with the weird sisters on the road to Forres. Heretofore his resentment has been repressed, denied, locked away in the unconscious. Since present fears are less than horrible imaginings, this Thane of Glamis has cast himself into the thick of every fray, “Nothing afraid of what [him]self didst make, / Strange images of death” (1.3.96-97); he has preferred to blot out the inner impulse, or “horrible imagining,” with an external sign, or “image of death.” Therefore, when it comes to protecting Duncan from the daggers of ambitious men, Macbeth is the nonpareil. The bloody man who brings report “of the revolt / The newest state” (1.2.1-2) cannot imagine what has possessed the Thane of Glamis to fight so relentlessly against overwhelming odds, unless perhaps he “meant to bathe in reeking wounds, / Or memorize another Golgotha” (1.2.39-40). But there is an element here of psychological realism, for according to Freud, drive (whether it be the will to power, sex drive, death drive, or poetic will) employs various mechanisms to defend itself against its own completeness, against its own need to look at what cannot be seen. Thus Macbeth's zeal in slaying the King's foes may be understood as a reaction formation by which he seeks to secure his ego against the return of bloody, repressed impulses from within.

The net effect of the witches' visit is that Macbeth is stripped forever of his ability to defend himself against his own black desires—which is why he “starts” when the weird sisters name him “King hereafter.” Their prophetic greeting is at once a fresh beginning and a cause of terror, for the suggestion that he may yet be King brings to mind, involuntarily, the repressed image of a bloody corse, a horrid vision of slain royalty which unfixes his hair and makes his seated heart to knock against his ribs, “against the use of nature.” He therefore attempts to dismiss the matter, and murder his murderous thought, with a chopped couplet, a failed attempt at closure: “Come what come may,” he says, “Time and the hour runs through the roughest day” (1.3.147-48). That his words are spoken not in resignation, but with an edge of resentment, is made apparent not only in the potentially bloody verb, “runs through,” but in the swelling act which follows. Were he resigned, there would be no assassination, and no play.

By referring him to “the coming on of time, with a ‘Hail, King that shalt be!’” the weird sisters legitimize, as it were, Macbeth's claim to a kingly title. But every title—whether it be the name of king, father, god, or Thane of Cawdor—is a “former title” (1.2.65). We always arrive too late: someone else has always come first. Macbeth, likewise, feels a vague resentment that he has not come first, that another should be already that which he wishes himself to be. Like many of his contemporaries, he would like to be King, and he is nearer than most to the crown. Unfortunately, Duncan exists already as the thing itself. Macbeth has been deprived of the kingship, as it were, by his own “belatedness.” Since Duncan holds a prior claim to the title, having come first in time, Macbeth must wait on time, as time's slave, for that which is “rightfully” his. It is an injury to his will, and Duncan will suffer for it.

It is here on the road to Forres that Macbeth's conscious assumptions about time are first called into question, as the play begins to probe the nature of man's relationship to time and causality. For example, there is in Banquo's phrase, “the seeds of time,” a genitive, and generative, ambiguity. If the “of” signifies composition
or content (box of alabaster, bag of groceries), if the seeds of time exist as sprouts of future time in potentia, the implication is that the future is not yet determined: men are the gardeners of their world, and as willful creators with “free hearts” they may cultivate this or that seed of time, causing it to flourish. That this is Duncan's view is made apparent in his words to Macbeth: “I have begun to plant thee,” he says, “and will labor / To make thee full of growing” (1.4.28-29). If, on the other hand, the “of” is possessive, and time itself is the gardener, then it is left to the goddesses of destiny to say which grain will grow and which will not. The future then is fixed, contained in the present, and though man's seated, or “seeded,” heart may knock against the use of nature, time shall have its pleasure. This is Banquo's assumption, which is why he neither begs nor fears the witches' favors nor their hate.

Banquo's organic perception of time and stoic indifference to the chains of causality are foreign to Macbeth's mind. Macbeth advises men to plant themselves (3.1.129), and holds that man may be the master of his time (3.1.40). He therefore recoils before the witches' strange intelligence, for their words, their “shall be” instead of “mayst be,” or even a “shalt be—if,” implies that all growth is foreordained. In this more than mortal knowledge the Thane of Glamis “seems rapt withal,” and wrapped as well, perceiving himself as, perhaps, a mere seed cast by time and fortune—a fearful meditation. Ironically, it is at precisely this moment, in which he hears himself named King hereafter, that the chilling thought first occurs to Macbeth that he may, in fact, be no more than time's slave.

That Macbeth cannot command transience is illustrated for him, as for us, in his command to the weird sisters: “Stay, you imperfect speakers,” he says, “tell me more / … Speak, I charge you” (1.3.70, 78). But the women promptly vanish, like the inhabitants of the earth, “Into the air, and what seemed corporal melted / As breath into the wind” (1.3.81-82). Macbeth's cry—“Would they had stayed!”—should, I think, be spoken on stage not wistfully, but with sudden and unexpected anger. Here was a vision of that earthly transience before which the self is nullified, and the assertive “will” reduced to “would.” Banquo and Macbeth, no less than these three old women, are among earth's “bubbles” (1.3.79), to be burst, sooner or later, by antic Death's little pin.

Lost in his contemplation of time's “it was,” Macbeth is overcome with a temporal vertigo that dizzies his speech. For example, when he learns that he has been named Thane of Cawdor, he says, “The greatest is behind” (1.3.117). Macbeth's conscious meaning is that the greatest is “to follow,” is yet to come, but the odd phrasing, which curiously conflates past and future, contains a suspicion that the greatest is irredeemably “behind him,” has come and gone.

Again, when he turns to those who stay upon his leisure, Macbeth excuses himself, saying, “My dull brain was wrought / With things forgotten” (1.3.149-50). The sentence itself is an attempt to murder the thought of killing Duncan. We might expect Macbeth to say, “My dull brain was wrought with matters that I will forget about for now. Let us toward the King.” Rather, his use of the past participle seems an attempt, in mid-sentence, to pronounce himself free of that horrible imagining which continues to shake him. Thus his lie to Banquo and company is a lie also to himself, for his mind is wrought with deeds, names, and men that are all but forgotten.

Having been referred to the coming on of time, Macbeth can see only time's “it was.” That which is great to be, is only a mirroring repetition of that greatness which lies behind. “Kind gentlemen,” he says, “your pains / Are registered where every day I turn / The leaf to read them” (1.4.150-52). But which way are the pages turning, forward or backward? He seems to mean, “Each day you perform new favors to be recorded,” but his words demand another reading as well: every day of his life he turns a new leaf, looking for a blank page on which to inscribe his name, only to find, already recorded there, the pains of kind (like-minded) gentlemen. As he speaks to his friends, Macbeth sees nothing before him but the spectres of the past. Every dread exploit, every heroic deed, every great name, is anticipated by time. Moreover, even if he does succeed in carving out a name and passage, his life will only fall into the sear, the yellow leaf of a tedious chronicle (5.3.22-23)—so that nothing is, but what is not.
In considering what motivates Macbeth, our vision has been too easily clouded by our own conventional goodness and perhaps, too, by the timidity of our evil. The traditional view of Macbeth as a man torn between his black desires on the one hand and Christian virtue on the other is too simple. For example, the thought occurs to Macbeth, “If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me, / Without my stir” (1.3.143-44). According to the customary reading of these lines, Macbeth has, then, good cause not to murder Duncan: if the weird sisters speak true, he need only wait, and the crown will fall into his lap—and that, perhaps, is Macbeth's conscious meaning. But we may perceive also in this short aside a spur to regicide: for if chance crowns him without his stir, what will he have gained? Only that which was foretold, a fruitless crown and barren sceptre. But he will have lost much. It is essential to Macbeth that he create himself as King, that he be crowned not passively by the hands of time and chance, but actively, by his own mortal hands. To be made King without his stir will not answer for him the question of whether or not he is simply time's slave, subject to experience whatever time has in store. Macbeth's question is not, Dare I do a wicked deed to gain the Scottish crown, but rather, Do I dare disturb the universe? Shall I resign myself as the slave of limit, or shall I seek to liberate myself, by jumping the life to come and seizing the future now, on my own terms? Lady Macbeth, therefore, says more than she knows when she chides her husband, saying that when neither time nor place adheres, he “would make both,” but when “they have made themselves,” their very fitness doth “unmake him” (1.7.51-54). The paradox of willful self-creation could not be more succinctly stated. Macbeth is nothing afeard of what he makes himself (1.3.96), but only of what makes him.

Macbeth's answer to his humiliation at the hands of the clock is to take a literal revenge: he will attack time with a dagger, will break time's laws, will take the future now in the ignorant present, seizing forcibly that which he has come already to perceive as his—the name and all the addition to a king. But the name of king, in Macbeth's mind, is no ordinary name, and his deed shall be no ordinary deed. Macbeth, like Cleopatra, wills “To do that thing that ends all other deeds, / Which shackles accidents and bolts up change”; but he is far from sharing Cleopatra's opinion that “’Tis paltry to be Caesar,” nor perceives that a king, “not being Fortune,” is but “Fortune's knave” (A&C, 5.2.2-6). Cleopatra wills to defeat time by transforming herself into an everlasting legend. Macbeth cares nothing for legend. He'll defeat time literally, by creating himself King of the empirical realm whether or not Fortune wills to have it so. He’ll have a name greater than any name named under Heaven.

Harold Bloom, in his essay on poetry as a mode of lying against time, has followed the Gnostic Valentinius in noting that mortal man, desiring to transcend time and flesh and death, may fashion images, in the name of a god, which in turn become objects of fear to him, as for example, the idolator with his stone idol, or the terrified speaker of Blake's "Tyger." This fear may be identified as the fear of a name, whether it be the artist's fear of a daemonic name (in having fashioned the unheimlich, or “uncanny”), or the pagan's creation of a god with a name greater than his own.11 Macbeth likewise, perceiving himself to be a slave of time, quakes not so much at the thought of mere killing as at the image, fashioned by himself, of “King” Macbeth, a being which seems, in his mind's eye, to transcend time. The name of King, pre-existent and immortal, and endowed with a power and freedom not available to Macbeth as subject, seems to offer the promise of a new temporality in which time and death become subject to the self. Macbeth, like the sublime poet, like the savage idolator, thus creates an image before which he may bow the knee, populating the empty vault with a god after his own fashion. If he trembles before the image of a fallen King Duncan, he trembles also before the image of King Macbeth, a being shaped not by time but by his own devices, a sublime creation, greater than himself, a King of kings, and killer of kings. It is this doubly frightening thought which makes his heart knock against his ribs, for having once fashioned in his mind the image of King Macbeth, that identity alone seems authentic. To be a self-made King is to be sublime. To be less is nothing.

It now becomes clear why Macbeth's mind is given to such marvellous soliloquies regarding the horror of the deed he is about to perform: Macbeth needs these images, as it were, to convince himself of the sublimity of his crime. His fecund imagination would rescue the intended act from time's abyss, and endow it with meaning. While “pity, like a naked newborn babe, / Striding the blast” and “heaven's cherubin horded / Upon
the sightless couriers of the air” appear strong against the deed, it is precisely such images that allow Macbeth to continue believing that a knife in Duncan will indeed break the bands of transience. Pale Hecate's offerings, images of withered murder alarumed by the wolf, Tarquin's ghostly presence, all help to reassure Macbeth's heat-oppressed brain that his crime will surely be a deed horrid and grand enough to free his will from its chains. For most men, such visions were enough to sickly o’er the native hue of resolution, but Macbeth's bloody dagger, a false creation, only marshals him the way that he was going. He must allow nothing to “take the present horror from the time” (1.7.58). I do not suppose, of course, that Macbeth knows all this. Maybe Shakespeare knew it, in his own way, but the argument is not, finally, a “psychological” one, for it takes place in the interstice of a continuing textual preoccupation with time and causality.

Ironically, Macbeth's deed, crucifixion of sorts, does seem to shock time into a momentary stasis: “By th’clock tis day,” says Ross, “And yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp” (2.4.6-7). It is a critical commonplace to note that the shock is only momentary; but the reaction is not, as in DeQuincey's formulation, a matter of the “human” making its reflex upon the “fiendish.” Rather, time and transience reassert themselves, as Macduff calls “timely” upon the King. Nor was time or the “natural order” ever really assaulted, though many Scotsmen would interpret it so. ‘Twas a rough night, but the regicide, no less than Macdonwald's rebellion, Norway's invasion, the earthquake and storm, is a confused event “New hatched to th’woeful time” (2.3.53). There is no causal link between Macbeth's deed and the storm, any more than between Macdonwald's rebellion and the “contending ’gainst obedience” of Duncan's horses (2.4.17). Brutal violence, whether by man or beast, is very much a part of the so-called “natural order,” both before and after Duncan's death.

To seize the kingship had seemed to Macbeth a deed to stop “the spring, the head, the fountain,” the “very source” of natural succession, while halting also the flow of kingly blood (2.3.100-01). It is neither. If one man may seize the crown by violence without an apocalypse, so then may another. The sun has not yet come full circle before King Macbeth realizes that his fears in Banquo stick deep. Banquo, who in his sleep is given to cursed thoughts (2.1.7-9), has confessed that he, too, dreams at night of the weird sisters (2.1.20); and Macbeth notes that he “chid the sisters, / When first they put the name of King upon me”—an observation which suggests that Banquo resents Macbeth's priority, resents that the sisters did not first put the name of King upon him (3.1.58). Macbeth had hoped that his deed without a name would trammel up consequence. Finding it otherwise, he is vexed by every minute of Banquo's being (3.1.117), and resolves that it “must be done tonight” (3.1.131). If the assassination of Duncan proved nothing, the murder of Banquo and Fleance will, for the seeds of Banquo then will never grow as prophesied. Just two more murders will “Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond” which keeps him pale, the bond of causality, or “fate,” which subjects him as time's debtor, captive, and slave (3.2.49-50).

When he has come to terms with the killers, Macbeth exclaims happily, “It is concluded!” (3.1.141)—only to find, once again, that nothing is concluded. Lady Macbeth, for her part, would like to think that “Things without all remedy / Should be without regard: what's done is done” (3.2.11-12). But she soon finds herself asking her lord, “What’s to be done?” (3.2.44)—as if to say, What’s yet to be done? What shall be done? What ought to be done? What can or does it mean—“to be done?”

When the murderers return and tell the King “how much is done” (3.3.22), his fit comes again, in the figure of Banquo's ghost; although “when all's done,” he looks but on a stool. The vision only hardens his resolve: “It will have blood, they say: blood will have blood. / Stones have been known to move and trees to speak”—or stones to speak and trees to move—“Augures and understood relations have by maggot-pies and choughs and rooks brought forth / The secret'st man of blood” (3.4.123-27). Here again, the usual error is to hear in these words only the voice of fear, when there is, in fact, some metaphysical comfort (for Macbeth, as for us) in the thought that the natural order has risen up against him—else the sublimity of his crime threatens to vanish into a futile insignificance, as mere death and emptiness. Nature's supposed opposition will not, therefore, discourage Macbeth from doing his will: “… I will … / … I will … / … I will … / … For mine own good /
All causes shall give way.” In other words, “All considerations shall be forgot as I take my revenge on all causation.” It will be a bloody, tedious business: for “I am in blood / Stepped so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er” (3.4.131-41). There is now only a “going o’er” (and over and over), and no “o’erleaping.” In the landscape of Macbeth’s imagination there is a swift river of time, a tide of blood having as its source time’s “it was” and all that has gone before. But having once pricked the sides of his intent and spurred vaulting ambition, Macbeth has jumped the life to come, and—fallen in! If he makes it now to that other shore, it will only be by slogging through blood up to his ears.

The Thane of Fife is next to bleed. When Macbeth learns, from the apparition of the armed head, that he should “Beware Macduff,” he vows to “make assurance double sure / And take a bond of fate” (4.1.71, 83-84) to make fate prisoner and debtor to himself. Best to force the apparition to keep its word of promise: he will kill Macduff, and have done. But once again, Macbeth arrives too late, for the Thane of Fife is fled to England. “Time,” exclaims the King, “thou anticipat’st my dread exploits” (4.1.144). From now on, it will be an open battle. If Macbeth cannot make his time stand still, he will make it run:

The flighty purpose never is o’ertook
Unless the deed go with it. From this moment
The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done.

(4.1.145-49)

And “Thus,” in Zarathustra’s words, “the liberating will becomes a felon, and upon all that can suffer it wreaks revenge for its inability to go backwards.” Have I arrived too late to kill Macduff? Very well, I’ll kill “His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line” (4.1.152-53). This is a key moment in the history of Macbeth’s reactivity, as we go from Macdonwald to Duncan to Banquo to the Macduffs. Macbeth turns again to frantic killing, as if on a battlefield, as a means of erasing the temporal interval between acts, by constantly acting, allowing time no interval for re-action, and no chance to anticipate him, like a boxer who flails his opponent against the ropes. His brandished steel will smoke in bloody execution until such time as he can say, “It is done.” Thus “Each new morn / New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows / Strike heaven on the face” (4.3.5-6). What’s the newest grief? “Each minute teems a new one,” for each minute is itself a grief, a ceasing to be, an injury to the will that must be avenged with the sword (5.3.174-76). Yet Macbeth finds that with each bloody revenge, time will “close and be herself, whilst our poor malice / Remains in danger of her former tooth,” her “it was” (3.2.14-15).

Too late, Macbeth realizes that “He cannot buckle his distempered cause / Within the belt of rule” (5.2.15-16). Having willed himself to be a causeless man, a self-made king, he learns that causation resists the will as surely as “being” resists “being done.” There is stasis only in death. This recognition that being exists only as transience proves too great a burden for his will to bear. The formula, “Nothing is, but what is not,” turns upon itself: What is, is nothing, for all that is, is transient, a vanishing into the abyss:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.

(5.5.19-23)
Macbeth has always favored “tomorrow” as the blessed ground whereon the will may appear to operate freely: “We’ll take tomorrow” (3.1.22); “But of that tomorrow” (3.1.32); “Tomorrow / We’ll hear ourselves again” (3.4.32-33); “I will tomorrow, / And betimes I will, to the weird sisters” (3.4.133-34). But now his will seems extinguished by the stuttering repetition of a million deadly tomorrows endlessly the same. It does not matter, in the end, what history's “last syllable” is. Macbeth knows it only as a “like syllable of dolor,” a sound that signifies nothing. Three, or four, or a billion tomorrows cannot finally be distinguished from the plural yesterday which led like-minded gentlemen to their inevitable, and redundant, conclusion.

Thus Macbeth comes at last to cast off the sublimity of self-creation in spite of time, as he embraces the sublime necessity of dying in time. “Out, out, brief candle!” If a man cannot have, cannot be, the be-all and the end-all, better then not to be, better that no man should be, that earthly existence itself should cease to be. Thus spake Zarathustra: “Because the willer must suffer, because he cannot will backwards—thus willing itself and all life has been perceived as—punishment! … until at last madness preached: ‘Everything passes away; therefore everything deserves to pass away!’”13 “What’s done cannot be undone” (5.1.71)—which is precisely why Macbeth wishes that “th’estate o’ th’ world were now undone” (5.6.50). He’d have “nature’s germens tumble all together, / Even till destruction sicken” (4.1.59-60).

It is his weariness of time's petty procession which allows Macbeth finally to embrace his fate: “Blow wind, come wrack!” he cries. “There is nor flying hence nor tarrying here” (5.5.1, 48), no afterlife or permanence, nothing but death and transience, a passing away. He therefore leaves the safety of Dunsinane, a castle which might indeed have laughed a siege to scorn, and marches forth to meet his fate, come what come may, motivated no longer by “poor malice” and a will to revenge but by a profound acceptance of death—of his own and every man's.

Yet, as a man bound to Fortune's wheel, Macbeth has come around, at least, to perceive the futility of brandished steel and smoking execution, unlike those “good” men in his world who still look to revenge as the answer to their ills: “Be comforted,” says the future King. “Let’s make us med’cines of our great revenge, / To cure this deadly grief” (4.3.213-15). Caithness likewise sees in Malcolm's burning revenge “the med’cine of the sickly weal” (5.2.27), with an unintended pun on “wheel,” for he fails to apprehend that literal revenges lead inevitably to revenges in kind. Revenge cannot, in fact, cure deadly grief, for it is revenge itself which makes grief deadly. Time's “it was” cannot be remedied in the empirical realm. Therefore, says Macbeth, “Throw physic to the dogs, I'll none of it” (5.3.47). Having acknowledged his fate as time's fool, he is determined only to fight the course, to see the dismal story out, to meet his enemy on the field beard to beard, and let the gashes fall where they may; for though revenge as a physic may comfort the dogs that bait the bear-like king (5.7.1-2), Macbeth for his part has come to perceive it rather as a poisoned chalice which men raise to their own lips, a sickly wheel which returns to plague the inventor—though there is, of course, no “inventor,” no author, no prime mover. That was his illusion in Act I. All revenges are revenges in kind, more of the same, and every deed has a pre-existent name, including regicide.

Resolved still that he “must not yield / To one of woman born,” King Macbeth learns, too late, that his adversary was “from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped” (5.8.12-16). Macduff, the living consequence of Macbeth's revenges of the past, appears as the outcome of an untimely breach in nature. Macbeth must face him and perish, or yield, and live to be the literal fool of time, “the show and gaze o’th’ time,” a poor player on a tether to be baited with the rabble's curse. “I will not yield,” he vows, “To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet” (5.8.27-28). The ground before young Malcolm's feet is Scotland's future, a dusty path which Macbeth has no will to see. Rather, he will continue to carve his own passage till he finds himself concluded on the bloody point of Macduff's sword: “Yet I will try the last … / And damned be him that first cries, ‘Hold, enough!’” (5.8.32-34).

When Macduff enters with “King” Macbeth's severed head fixed upon a spear, he greets Malcolm, saying, “Hail, King! for so thou art: behold, where stands / Th’ usurper's cursed head. The time is free” (5.8.54-55).
Macduff means, of course, that Malcolm may now be called “King;” since the world has been liberated from the tyrant Macbeth. But the ambiguous “so” suggests a second, ironic, meaning: “O ‘King,’ behold this pitiful scarecrow, this death's head upon a stick: for so thou art. The man who would be king is a poor usurper, cursed by time; for time, in fact, is king, and time is free to work his will on all his human slaves.” Fortune thus has granted to Macbeth his wish that he “memorize another Golgotha”: for when his robes have been removed, we, like Malcolm, may behold Shakespeare's macabre caricature of the human potentate, “a new Gorgon,” the King of kings, in a grotesque crucifixion, “as our rarer monsters are, / Painted upon a pole, and underwrit, / ‘Here you may see the tyrant’” (5.8.25-27).

If indeed the late King's bodiless head may serve the usurping Malcolm as a mirror by which to view his own figure and fate (even as Macdonwald's might have done for Macbeth), then King Malcolm—Macbeth's first cousin once removed—is next in line to tread the dusty path to Calvary, as in the Chronicles. He has been revenged on his foes, and in his final speech vows to make himself “even” with his thanes and kinsmen in exchange for their several loves (5.8.62). But Malcolm will not be “even” with his subjects until he, too, lies like Macbeth, “planted newly with the time,” six feet beneath the earth, that another seed may grow. His revenge on Macbeth and time, his succession to the throne of Scotland, is not a redemption but another belated repetition, for in the world of Macbeth, all such literal revenges, unlike the poet's figurative revenge, in the end yield only death.

John Irwin has noted that this phenomenon, this impulse to take revenge on time and its inevitable failure, seems to be “the very essence of tragedy”: “for I take it that all tragedies are in a sense revenger's tragedies—actions in which the central figure (or the audience observing him) comes to the tragic awareness that, because of the irreversibility of time, man in time can never get even, indeed, comes to understand that the whole process of getting even is incompatible with time.” There is no better play to illustrate Irwin's point than Shakespeare's Macbeth. Having lashed out at time and failed, Macbeth's frustrated will gradually turns against itself, and yields finally to the nihilistic conclusion that all life is punishment, all existence incoherent gibberish to the last petty syllable of recorded time.

II

The will must be delivered from its aversion to time and transience if ever it is to be delivered from the impulse to degrade what is transient. But to deliver itself from all willing requires a plunge into the abyss, a deliverance from all earthly existence. Rather, the will must find a way to say “yes” to life, a “yes” that would have transience abide, and would not have it degraded to nothingness; a “yes,” not to being as being done, but to being as becoming. But to say “yes” to transience the will must no longer be limited in its temporality by the necessity of an irreversible and immovable past. One answer, then, is to seek a figurative triumph over time. Only through poetry and art—in a different sense, the syllables of recorded time—is the will able to transform “it was” into “it is,” and “thus did it happen” into “thus have I willed it!”

Harold Toliver, in his essay on “Shakespeare and the Abyss of Time,” has said that “Perhaps the central paradox of the play is that the most depraved of Shakespeare's tragic heroes should have become also the most poetic.” For “depraved” let us read “degraded,” and for “paradox,” “irony”: the central irony of the play is that Macbeth, degraded by time, should have become also the most poetic, for Macbeth fails to realize his own powers of figuration. Though masterful in his use of figurative language, he neglects language as an alternate means of transcending time's inexorability. Although his imagination spawns timeless metaphors, his dull brain is, nevertheless, all too literalistic. Macbeth, in waging a literal war on the natural order, “chokes [his] art,” impressing language into the service of a literal revenge. (1.2.9).

What Harold Bloom says about sado-masochistic poets may be applied also to Macbeth, Shakespeare's poetic sado-masochist; to wit, when figuration and sadism are identified, “then we find always the obsession with … belatedness risen to a terrible intensity that plays out the poet's revenge against time by the unhappy
substitution of the body, another body or one's own, for time. Raging against time, forgetting that only Eros or figuration is a true revenge against time, the sadomasochist over-literalizes and so yields to the death drive.”

Bloom goes on to say that “Sadism and masochism are over-literalizations of meaning,” a “failure in the possibilities of figurative language.” As “a furious literalism,” sadism “denies the figurative representation of essence by act. … Lacking poetry, the sado-masochist yields to the literalism of the death drive precisely out of a rage against literal meaning.” Macbeth wills to degrade all that is, because he has failed to recognize in his own mythopoeic imagination the tool by which he may redeem actuality and say “yes” to life; he has not perceived that the only revenge on time's “it was” is figurative and poetic; to seek a literal revenge is to yield to the abyss. Thus, when his literal revenges on time have failed, he accepts literal death.

Against the literalism and compulsive repetition of Macbeth's death drive, Shakespeare has set his own sublime poetic will. In Macbeth the impotence of kings before time is contrasted with the dramatist's power to recover the past, and to impose upon it his own order, by means of poetic figuration. This is not, of course, peculiar to Macbeth. As Irwin has noted, “One might say that the purpose and point of … all narration is to use the temporal medium of narration to take revenge against time, to use narration to get even with the very mode of narration's existence in a daemonic attempt to prove that through the process of substitution and repetition, time is not really irreversible.” Historical narrative is, in its very essence, an argument against time, a willful recovery and revision of the past, a revengeful substitution of “it is” for “it was.” Moreover, Bloom's point is well taken that this argument inevitably splits in two, for after displacing time's “it was,” the poetic will “needs to make another outrageous substitution of ‘I am’ for ‘It is.’” Both parts of the argument are quests for priority.” The poetic will's revenge on time, no less than the empirical power thrust, is taken to avenge one's own sense of belatedness.

But what's to be done, then, when time's “it was” is already recomposed by another? Shakespeare, in following Holinshed, is faced with a double perplexity, for he is preceded not only by time, but by recorded time. Shakespeare, therefore, in his dramatic narrative, must assert his priority over both history and “history,” transforming time past, and past narrative, into the timeless presence of an acted text. Doubly redoubling the strokes of his pen, he performs marvels of temporal dexterity throughout the drama, demonstrating that he is not, like his predecessor Holinshed, limited by time. For example: the script of Macbeth's performance against Norway and Macdonwald which King Duncan “reads” is, in fact, a tale told by a dramatist some 550 years later (1.3.90, 97). Again, when “Two truths are told / As happy prologues to the swelling act / Of the imperial theme” (1.3.127-29), the act is at once a self-aggrandizing, bloody deed in the dramatic future, and the present grand dramatic performance of an historical deed already done. Macbeth, who has in his head “strange things / / Which must be acted ere they may be scanned” (3.4.140-41), alludes unwittingly to the day in which his thoughts shall be set to lines of blank verse, having been acted by him ere scanned by a player, and acted by a player ere scanned by the world at large. Again, the heavens which, “troubled with man's act, / Threatens his bloody stage” (2.4.5-6), are at once the “real” heavens over Macbeth's Scotland and the imaginary “heavens” over Shakespeare's bloody stage, some six centuries after the fact. Time and again we find that the dramatist need not be bound by terrestrial or by narrative time. Past, present, and future may be captured in an instant.

Any well-crafted play is, of course, bound to be more immediate, more “present,” than an equally well-crafted prose narrative of those same events. If dramatist and historian alike are friends that lie like truth, if both tell lies against time, at least the dramatist’s “it is” recalls the past in a way that the historian's “what was” can never hope to match. But Raphael Holinshed tells many a sad story of the deaths of kings, some deposed, some slain in war, some haunted by the ghosts that they deposed, some sleeping killed, all murdered by time. What, then, was there, given the six long volumes of the Chronicles, about the tale of King Makbeth that alone captured Shakespeare's imagination? Almost any story therein might have served as a vehicle by which to displace time's “it was” with the dramatic present. But what in Makbeth's life story suggested to Shakespeare a possibility to assert his own “I am?” The answer is not immediately apparent. His selection of Makbeth, at first glance, seems rather arbitrary, for as Holinshed tells the story, it would appear to have little in the way of dramatic potential: “To be briefe, such were the woorthie and princely acts of this Makbeth in
the administration of the realme, that if he had atteined therevnto by rightfull means, and continued in
vprightness of iustice as he began, till the end of his reigne, he might well haue been numbred amongst the
most noble princes that anie where had reigned."\(^{21}\) There was, of course, the murder of Duncan, the portents
in earth and sky, and the attendant prophecy of witches to lend interest to the story, but regicides, omens, and
prophecies are all but commonplace in Holinshed. If anything, the Makbeth of the Chronicles is distinguished
not by his evil, but by his goodness, specifically by his "manie holosome laws and statutes." Holinshed lists in
all twenty laws enacted by King Makbeth for "the publike weale of his subiects." But the statute which seems
most to have intrigued Shakespeare is the King's decree that poor players should be heard no more: for
Holinshed reports that Makbeth was the first Scottish king to outlaw such vain and foolish entertainments:
"Counterfeit fooles, minstrels, iesters, and these kind of iuglers, with such like idle persons, that range abroad
in the countrie, hauing no speciall license of the king, shall be compelled to learne some science or craft to get
their liuing; if they refuse so to doo, they shall be drawen like horsses in the plough and harrows."\(^{22}\)

King Makbeth's hubris in asserting his supremacy over players, in licensing the few and demeaning the rest,
thus lends to the "Tomorrow" soliloquy of Shakespeare's \textit{Macbeth} a wonderful irony: we may see now why it
should be especially galling to this great usurper that his life in retrospect should appear so like the antics of a
poor player strutting and fretting upon a stage. The King is forced to turn to the player for a metaphor by
which to express the meaning of his own meaninglessness—thereby giving to the player a possibility for
value and meaning which he himself cannot seem to find. Holinshed, for his part, wholly approves of King
Makbeth's diligence in having protected the commonwealth from such theatrical knaves.\(^{23}\) But it is here that
Shakespeare makes his figurative revenge on time complete, for we find in \textit{Macbeth} that the tables are turned.
Counterfeit kings, with such like idle persons, may not range abroad without special license of the playwright,
but are compelled to learn the art of playing to get their living. Macbeth, the man who begins the play as
"Bellona's bridegroom lapped in proof," the minion of his race, thus must die "with harness on [his] back," not
only as time's fool, but as time's jade, carving his bloody furrow at the crack of the dramatist's whip
(1.2.19, 54; 5.5.52).

In their moment of defeat, most earthly kings, like the King of Norway, crave composition (1.2.59). Their
fate, thereafter, lies in the hands of fiends who lie like truth. It is not the sort of immortality sought by King
Macbeth. Unlike Hamlet or Cleopatra, Macbeth expresses no desire to have his story told, for it seems a tale
told by an idiot. He would not have the moment of his greatness reduced to a flickering shadowshow for
generations to come. Indeed, his aversion to Banquo's ghost appears to be, at least in part, the unspeakable
horror of one day being pulled from his tomb by "these juggling fiends" (5.8.19), by players "and these kind of
iuglers" (Holinshed), whom the historical Makbeth once outlawed; it is a fate which Macbeth cannot
endure to think on. "Hence, horrible shadow!" he cries. "Unreal mock'ry, hence!" (3.4.107-08). Such
imitations of immortality are not to his liking.

Seeing Banquo resurrected upon the stage, Macbeth cries out,

\begin{verbatim}
If charnel houses and our graves must send
Those that we bury back, our monuments
Shall be the maws of kites.
\end{verbatim}

(3.4.72-74)

Macbeth is thinking here of his own dusty death; when he passes, better that his flesh should be hacked and
fed to birds than to be resurrected thus. If, in the false creations of heat-oppressed brains, men may rise again
with twenty mortal murders on their crowns, it will surely push kings from their stools (3.4.80-83); therefore,
Macbeth will none of it. He feels his secret murders sticking on his hands, and the intuition that such murders,
too terrible for the ear, may be "performed," leaves him sick and trembling—so that, when the vision passes,
he is left only with the desperate hope that no one should "muse" at him (3.4.78, 86). The worst fate that
Macbeth can imagine is to survive in time only as a display of “unreal mock’ry,” or as an illustration for an underwrit text which says, “Here you may see the tyrant.”

Macbeth's wish is not granted, for it was ordained otherwise. This once and future king, whose brain the playwright wrought with things not to be forgotten, is to be cast forever as a slave of time, his life transformed into a timeless act. In his hour upon the stage, he will speak the same lines, hear the same prophetic greeting, make the same futile gestures. Each time he is ushered forth, he will waver in his determination to kill the King, wondering if his will is truly free. His secret murders shall be performed not just once, but o’er and o’er, so long as men can breathe, or eyes can see. And, full of sound and fury, he’ll proceed to his own smoking execution, only to be heard no more—until the next performance.

If there is a lesson to be learned in all this, it is not the moral didacticism of a narrative which seeks to demonstrate the wickedness and chaotic consequences of ambition or regicide, but rather a living illustration of how far superior the poet is to the king, and the figurative to the literal revenge on time. Kings may like to think themselves the harbingers of the life to come, but when the hurlyburly's done, when kings and subjects are dead and rotten, it is the verbal jugglers, the poets and playwrights, who “give them all breath, / Those clamorous harbingers of blood and death” (5.6.9-10). In this regard, it is worth noting Shakespeare's final salute to his own magnificence, for Macbeth, having begun with one prediction, closes with another. Malcolm promises to use his time wisely:

Producing forth the cruel ministers
Of this dead butcher and his fiendlike queen,
...—this, and what needful else
That calls upon us, by the grace of Grace
We will perform in measure, time, and place.

(5.8.68-73)

It is on this note that the play draws to a close, while drawing us, at the same time, to the play’s beginning. Shakespeare asserts his priority one last time, pointing in advance to his own masterful triumph over temporality. When all's done, someone shall “muse” at Macbeth. Malcolm unwittingly looks ahead to the day in which the King's Men will produce forth Macbeth and his fiendlike queen and all their cruel ministers, performing the story in measured verse, at Hampton Court, in 1606, by the grace of his Grace, the King—and by the conjurations of a wizard poet, whose redemptive time is the timeless present of that measure itself.

Notes


19. Irwin, p. 4.

**Criticism: Ethics And Political Ideology: Alan Sinfield (essay date 1986)**


[In the following essay, Sinfield contends that Macbeth is a political play that centers on the distinction between violence that the state considers legitimate and violence that it considers evil.]

It is often said that Macbeth is about ‘evil’, but we might draw a more careful distinction: between the violence which the State considers legitimate and that which it does not. Macbeth, we may agree, is a dreadful murderer when he kills Duncan. But when he kills Macdonwald—‘a rebel’ (I.ii.10)—he has Duncan's approval:

For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish’d steel,
Which smok’d with bloody execution,
Like Valour’s minion, carv’d out his passage,
Till he fac’d the slave;
which ne’er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam’d him from the nave to th’ chops,
And fix’d his head upon our battlements.
Duncan. O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!

(I.ii.16-24)\(^1\)

Violence is good, in this view, when it is in the service of the prevailing dispositions of power; when it
disrupts them it is evil. A claim to a monopoly of legitimate violence is fundamental in the development of the modern State; when that claim is successful, most citizens learn to regard State violence as qualitatively different from other violence and perhaps they don’t think of State violence as violence at all (consider the actions of police, army and judiciary as opposed to those of pickets, protesters, criminals and terrorists). Macbeth focusses major strategies by which the State asserted its claim at one conjuncture.

Generally in Europe in the sixteenth century the development was from Feudalism to the Absolutist State. Under Feudalism, the king held authority among his peers, his equals, and his power was often little more than nominal; authority was distributed also among overlapping non-national institutions such as the church, estates, assemblies, regions and towns. In the Absolutist State, power became centralised in the figure of the monarch, the exclusive source of legitimacy. The movement from one to the other was of course contested, not only by the aristocracy and the peasantry, whose traditional rights were threatened, but also by the gentry and urban bourgeoisie, who found new space for power and influence within more elaborate economic and governmental structures. Because of these latter factors especially, the Absolutist State was never fully established in England. Probably the peak of the monarch’s personal power was reached by Henry VIII; the attempt of Charles I to reassert that power led to the English Revolution. In between, Elizabeth and James I, and those who believed their interests to lie in the same direction, sought to sustain royal power and to suppress dissidents. The latter category was broad; it comprised aristocrats like the Earls of Northumberland and Westmorland who led the Northern Rising of 1569 and the Duke of Norfolk who plotted to replace Elizabeth with Mary Queen of Scots in 1571, clergy who refused the State religion, gentry who supported them and who tried to raise awkward matters in Parliament, writers and printers who published criticism of State policy, the populace when it complained about food prices, enclosures, or anything.

The exercise of State violence against such dissidents depended upon the achievement of a degree of legitimation—upon the acceptance by many people that State power was, at least, the lesser of two evils. A principal means by which this was effected was the propagation of an ideology of Absolutism, which represented the English State as a pyramid, any disturbance of which would produce general disaster, and which insisted increasingly on the ‘divine right’ of the monarch. This system was said to be ‘natural’ and ordained by ‘God’; it was ‘good’ and disruptions of it ‘evil’. This is what some Shakespeareans have celebrated as a just and harmonious ‘world picture’. Compare Perry Anderson’s summary: ‘Absolutism was essentially just this: a redeployed and recharged apparatus of feudal domination, designed to clamp the peasant masses back into their traditional social position.’

The reason why the State needed violence and propaganda was that the system was subject to persistent structural difficulties. Macbeth, like very many plays of the period, handles anxieties about the violence exercised under the aegis of Absolutist ideology. Two main issues come into focus. The first is the threat of a split between legitimacy and actual power—when the monarch is not the strongest person in the State. Such a split was altogether likely during the transition from Feudalism to the Absolutist State; hence the infighting within the dominant group in most European countries. In England the matter was topical because of the Essex rebellion in 1599: it was easy for the charismatic earl, who had shown at Cadiz that Englishmen could defeat Spaniards, to suppose that he would make a better ruler than the aging and indecisive Elizabeth, for all her legitimacy. So Shakespeare’s Richard II warns Northumberland, the kingmaker, that he is bound, structurally, to disturb the rule of Bolingbroke:

\[
\text{thou shalt think,}
\]

\[
\text{Though he [Bolingbroke] divide the realm and give thee half,}
\]

\[
\text{It is too little, helping him to all.}(4)
\]

Jonathan Dollimore and I have argued elsewhere that the potency of the myth of Henry V in Shakespeare’s play, written at the time of Essex’s ascendancy, derives from the striking combination in that monarch of legitimacy and actual power. At the start of Macbeth the manifest dependency of Duncan’s State upon its best
fighter sets up a dangerous instability (this is explicit in the sources). In the opening soliloquy of Act I scene vii Macbeth freely accords to Duncan entire legitimacy: he is Duncan's kinsman, subject and host, the king has been ‘clear in his great office’, and the idea of his deposition evokes religious imagery of angels, damnation and cherubins. But that is all the power the king has that does not depend upon Macbeth; against it is ranged ‘Vaulting ambition’, Macbeth's impetus to convert his actual power into full regal authority.

The split between legitimacy and actual power was always a potential malfunction in the developing Absolutist State. A second problem was less dramatic but more persistent. It was this: what is the difference between Absolutism and tyranny?—having in mind contemporary occurrences like the Massacre of St Bartholomew's in France in 1572, the arrest of more than a hundred witches and the torturing and killing of many of them in Scotland in 1590-91, and the suppression of the Irish by English armies. The immediate reference for questions of legitimate violence in relation to Macbeth is the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. This attempted violence against the State followed upon many years of State violence against Roman Catholics: the Absolutist State sought to draw religious institutions entirely within its control, and Catholics who actively refused were subjected to fines, imprisonment, torture and execution. Consider the sentence passed upon Jane Wiseman in 1598:

The sentence is that the said Jane Wiseman shall be led to the prison of the Marshalsea of the Queen's Bench, and there naked, except for a linen cloth about the lower part of her body, be laid upon the ground, lying directly on her back: and a hollow shall be made under her head and her head placed in the same: and upon her body in every part let there be placed as much of stones and iron as she can bear and more; and as long as she shall live, she shall have of the worst bread and water of the prison next her; and on the day she eats, she shall not drink, and on the day she drinks she shall not eat, so living until she die.6

This was for ‘receiving, comforting, helping and maintaining priests’, and refusing to reveal, under torture, who else was doing the same thing, and for refusing to plead. There is nothing abstract or theoretical about the State violence to which the present essay refers. Putting the issue succinctly in relation to Shakespeare's play, what is the difference between Macbeth's rule and that of contemporary European monarchs?

In Basilikon Doron (1599) King James tried to protect the Absolutist State from such pertinent questions by asserting an utter distinction between ‘a lawfull good King’ and ‘an usurping Tyran’:

The one acknowledgeth himselfe ordained for his people, having received from God a burthen of government, whereof he must be countable: the other thinketh his people ordained for him, a prey to his passions and inordinate appetites, as the fruite of his magnanimitie: And therefore, as their ends are directly contrarie, so are their whole actions, as meanes, whereby they preasse to attaine to their ends.7

Evidently James means to deny that the Absolutist monarch has anything significant in common with someone like Macbeth. Three aspects of James's strategy in this passage are particularly revealing. First, he depends upon an utter polarisation between the two kinds of ruler. Such antitheses are characteristic of the ideology of Absolutism: they were called upon to tidy the uneven apparatus of Feudal power into a far neater structure of the monarch versus the rest, and protestantism tended to see ‘spiritual’ identities in similarly polarised terms. James himself explained the function of demons like this: ‘since the Devill is the verie contrarie opposite to God, there can be no better way to know God, then by the contrarie’.8 So it is with the two kinds of rulers: the badness of one seems to guarantee the goodness of the other. Second, by defining the lawful good king against the usurping tyrant, James refuses to admit the possibility that a ruler who has not usurped will be tyrannical. Thus he seems to cope with potential splits between legitimacy and actual power by insisting on the unique status of the lawful good king, and to head off questions about the violence committed by such a ruler by suggesting that all his actions will be uniquely legitimate. Third, we may notice
that the whole distinction, as James develops it, is in terms not of the *behaviour* of the lawful good king and the usurping tyrant, respectively, but in terms of their *motives*. This seems to render vain any assessment of the actual manner of rule of the Absolute monarch. On these arguments, any disturbance of the current structure of power relations is against God and the people, and consequently any violence in the interest of the status quo is acceptable. Hence the legitimate killing of Jane Wiseman. (In fact, the distinction between lawful and tyrannical rule eventually breaks down even in James's analysis, as his commitment to the State leads him to justify even tyrannical behaviour in established monarchs.)

It is often assumed that *Macbeth* is engaged in the same project as King James: attempting to render coherent and persuasive the ideology of the Absolutist State. The grounds for a Jamesian reading are plain enough—to the point where it is often claimed that the play was designed specially for the king. At every opportunity Macbeth is disqualified ideologically and his opponents ratified. An entire antithetical apparatus of nature and supernature—the concepts through which a dominant ideology most commonly seeks to establish itself—is called upon to witness against him as usurping tyrant. ‘Nature’ protests against Macbeth (II.iv). Lady MacbethWelcome ‘Nature’s mischief’ (I.v.50) and Macbeth will have ‘Nature’s germens tumble all together, / Even till destruction sicken’ (IV.i.59-60). Good and evil are personified absolutely by Edward the Confessor and the Witches, and the language of heaven and hell runs through the play; Lady Macbeth conjures up ‘murth’ring ministers’ (I.v.48) and Macbeth acknowledges ‘The deep damnation of his [Duncan’s] taking-off’ (I.vii.20). It all seems organised to validate James’s contention, that there is all the difference in this world and the next between a usurping tyrant and a lawful good king. The whole strategy is epitomised in the account of Edward’s alleged curing of ‘the Evil’—actually scrofula—‘A most miraculous work in this good King’ (IV.iii.146-7). James himself knew that this was a superstitious practice, and he refused to undertake it until his advisers persuaded him that it would strengthen his claim to the throne in the public eye. As Francis Bacon observed, notions of the supernatural help to keep people acquiescent (e.g. the man in pursuit of power will do well to attribute his success ‘rather to divine Providence and felicity, than to his own virtue or policy’). *Macbeth* draws upon such notions more than any other play by Shakespeare. It all suggests that Macbeth is an extraordinary eruption in a good State—obscuring the thought that there might be any pronity to structural malfunctioning in the system. It suggests that Macbeth’s violence is wholly bad, whereas State violence committed by legitimate monarchs is quite different.

Such manoeuvres are even more necessary to a Jamesian reading of the play in respect of the deposition and killing of Macbeth. Absolutist ideology declared that even tyrannical monarchs must not be resisted, yet Macbeth could hardly be allowed to triumph. Here the play offers two moves. First, the fall of Macbeth seems to result more from (super)natural than human agency: it seems like an effect of the opposition of good and evil (‘Macbeth / Is ripe for shaking, and the Powers above / Put on their instruments’—IV.iii.237-9). Most cunningly, although there are material explanations for the moving of Birnam Wood and the unusual birth of Macduff, the audience is allowed to believe, at the same time, that these are (super)natural effects (thus the play works upon us almost as the Witches work upon Macbeth). Second, in so far as Macbeth’s fall is accomplished by human agency, the play is careful to suggest that he is hardly in office before he is overthrown. The years of successful rule specified in the chronicles are erased and, as Paul points out, neither Macduff nor Malcolm has tendered any allegiance to Macbeth. The action rushes along, he is swept away as if he had never truly been king. Even so, the contradiction can hardly vanish altogether. For the Jamesian reading it is necessary for Macbeth to be a complete usurping tyrant in order that he shall set off the lawful good king, and also, at the same time, for him not to be a ruler at all in order that he may properly be deposed and killed. Macbeth kills two people at the start of the play: a rebel and the king, and these are apparently utterly different acts of violence. That is the ideology of Absolutism. Macduff also, killing Macbeth, is killing both a rebel and a king, but now the two are apparently the same person. The ultimate intractability of this kind of contradiction disturbs the Jamesian reading of the play.

Criticism has often supposed, all too easily, that the Jamesian reading of *Macbeth* is necessary on historical grounds—that other views of State ideology were impossible for Shakespeare and his contemporaries. But
this was far from being so: there was a well-developed theory allowing for resistance by the nobility, and the Gunpowder Plotters were manifestly unconvinced by the king's arguments. Even more pertinent is the theory of the Scotsman George Buchanan, as we may deduce from the fact that James tried to suppress Buchanan's writings in 1584 after his assumption of personal rule; in Basilikon Doron he advises his son to 'use the Law upon the keepers' of 'such infamous invectives' (p. 40). With any case so strenuously overstated and manipulative as James's, we should ask what alternative position it is trying to put down. Arguments in favour of Absolutism constitute one part of Macbeth's ideological field—the range of ideas and attitudes brought into play by the text; another main part may be represented by Buchanan's De jure regni (1579) and History of Scotland (1582). In Buchanan's view sovereignty derives from and remains with the people; the king who exercises power against their will is a tyrant and should be deposed. The problem in Scotland is not unruly subjects, but unruly monarchs: 'Rebellions there spring less from the people than from the rulers, when they try to reduce a kingdom which from earliest times had always been ruled by law to an absolute and lawless despotism'. Buchanan's theory is the virtual antithesis of James's; it was used eventually to justify the deposition of James's son.

Buchanan's History of Scotland is usually reckoned to be one of the sources of Macbeth. It was written to illustrate his theory of sovereignty and to justify the overthrow of Mary Queen of Scots in 1567. In it the dichotomy of true lawful king and usurping tyrant collapses, for Mary is the lawful ruler and the tyrant, and her deposers are usurpers and yet lawful also. To her are attributed many of the traits of Macbeth: she is said to hate integrity in others, to appeal to the predictions of witches, to use foreign mercenaries, to place spies in the households of opponents and to threaten the lives of the nobility; after her surrender she is humiliated in the streets of Edinburgh as Macbeth fears to be. It is alleged that she would not have shrunk from the murder of her son if she could have reached him. This account of Mary as arch-tyrant embarrassed James, and that is perhaps why just eight kings are shown to Macbeth by the Witches (IV.i.119). Nevertheless, it was well established in protestant propaganda and in Spenser's Faerie Queene, and the Gunpowder Plot would tend to revivify it. Any recollection of the alleged tyranny of Mary, the lawful ruler, prompts awareness of the contradictions in Absolutist ideology, disturbing the customary interpretation of Macbeth. Once we are alert to this disturbance, the Jamesian reading of the play begins to leak at every joint.

One set of difficulties is associated with the theology of good, evil and divine ordination which purports to discriminate Macbeth's violence from that legitimately deployed by the State. I have written elsewhere of the distinctive attempt of Reformation Christianity to cope with the paradoxical conjunction in one deity of total power and goodness, and will here only indicate the scope of the problem. Macbeth, in the manner of Absolutist ideology and Reformation Christianity, strongly polarises 'good' and 'evil', but, at the same time, also like the prevailing doctrine, it insists on complete divine control of all human events. This twin determination produces a deity that sponsors the 'evil' it condemns and punishes. Orthodox doctrine, which was Calvinist in general orientation, hardly flinched from this conclusion (for example, James said in his Daemonologie that fallen angels are 'Gods hang-men, to execute such turnes as he employes them in'). Nevertheless, fictional reworkings of it often seem to point up its awkwardness, suggesting an unresolvable anxiety. Traditional criticism registers this factor in Macbeth in its inconclusive debates about how far the Witches make Macbeth more or less excusable or in charge of his own destiny. The projection of political issues onto supposedly (super)natural dimensions seems to ratify the Absolutist State but threatens also to open up another range of difficulties in contemporary ideology.

Macbeth also reveals a range of directly political problems to the reader rendered wary by Buchanan's analysis. They tend to break down the antithesis, upon which James relied, between the usurping tyrant and the legitimately violent ruler. Many of them have been noted by critics, though most commonly with the idea of getting them to fit into a single, coherent reading of the play. For a start, Duncan's status is in doubt: it is unclear how far his authority runs, he is imperceptive, and his State is in chaos well before Macbeth's violence against it (G. K. Hunter in the introduction to his Penguin edition (1967) registers unease at the 'violence and bloodthirstiness' of Macbeth's killing of Macdonwald (pp. 9-10)). Nor is Malcolm's title altogether clear, since
Duncan's declaration of him as 'Prince of Cumberland' (I.iv.35-42) suggests what the chronicles indicate, namely that the succession was not necessarily hereditary; Macbeth seems to be elected by the thanes (II.iv.29-32).

I have suggested that *Macbeth* may be read as working to justify the overthrow of the usurping tyrant. Nevertheless, the awkwardness of the issue is brought to the surface by the uncertain behaviour of Banquo. In the sources he collaborates with Macbeth, but to allow that in the play would taint King James's line and blur the idea of the one monstrous eruption. Shakespeare compromises and makes Banquo do nothing at all. He fears Macbeth played 'most fouly for't' (III.i.3) but does not even communicate his knowledge of the Witches' prophecies. Instead he wonders if they may 'set me up in hope' (III.i.10). If it is right for Malcolm and Macduff, eventually, to overthrow Macbeth, then it would surely be right for Banquo to take a clearer line.

Furthermore, the final position of Macduff appears quite disconcerting, once we read it with Buchanan's more realistic, political analysis in mind: Macduff at the end stands in the same relation to Malcolm as Macbeth did to Duncan in the beginning. He is now the king-maker on whom the legitimate monarch depends, and the recurrence of the whole sequence may be anticipated (in production this might be suggested by a final meeting of Macduff and the Witches). For the Jamesian reading it is necessary to feel that Macbeth is a distinctively 'evil' eruption in a 'good' system; awareness of the role of Macduff in Malcolm's State alerts us to the fundamental instability of power relations during the transition to Absolutism, and consequently to the uncertain validity of the claim of the State to the legitimate use of violence. Certainly Macbeth is a murderer and an oppressive ruler, but he is one version of the Absolutist ruler, not the polar opposite.

Malcolm himself raises very relevant issues in the conversation in which he tests Macduff: specifically tyrannical qualities are invoked. At one point, according to Buchanan, the Scottish lords 'give the benefit of the doubt' to Mary and her husband, following the thought that 'more secret faults' may be tolerated 'so long as these do not involve a threat to the welfare of the state' (*Tyrannous Reign*, p. 88). Macduff is prepared to accept considerable threats to the welfare of Scotland:

*Boundless intemperance*

In nature is a tyranny; it hath been
Th' untimely emptying of the happy throne,
And fall of many kings. But fear not yet
To take upon you what is yours: you may
Convey your pleasures in a spacious plenty,
And yet seem cold—the time you may so hoodwink:
We have willing dames enough; there cannot be
That vulture in you, to devour so many
As will to greatness dedicate themselves,
Finding it so inclin’d.

(IV.iii.66-76)

Tyranny in nature means disturbance in the metaphorical kingdom of a person's nature but, in the present context, one is likely to think of the effects of the monarch's intemperance on the literal kingdom. Macduff suggests that such behaviour has caused the fall not just of usurpers but of kings, occupants of 'the happy throne'. Despite this danger, he encourages Malcolm 'To take upon you what is yours'—a sinister way of putting it, implying either Malcolm's title to the State in general or his rights over the women he wants to seduce or assault. Fortunately the latter will not be necessary, there are 'willing dames enough': Macduff is ready to mortgage both the bodies and (within the ideology invoked in the play) the souls of women to the monster envisaged as lawful good king. It will be all right, apparently, because people can be hoodwinked: Macduff allows us to see that the virtues James tries to identify with the Absolutist monarch are an ideological strategy, and that the illusion of them will probably be sufficient to keep the system going.
Nor is this the worst: Malcolm claims more faults, and according to Macduff ‘avarice / Sticks deeper’ (lines 84-5): Malcolm may corrupt not merely people but property relations. Yet this too is to be condoned. Of course, Malcolm is not actually like this, but the point is that he well could be, as Macduff says many kings have been, and that would all be acceptable. And even Malcolm’s eventual protestation of innocence cannot get round the fact that he has been lying. He says ‘my first false speaking / Was this upon myself’ (lines 130-1) and that may indeed be true, but it nevertheless indicates the circumspection that will prove useful to the lawful good king, as much as to the tyrant. In Holinshed the culminating vice claimed by Malcolm is lying, but Shakespeare replaces it with a general and rather desperate evocation of utter tyranny (lines 91-100); was the original self-accusation perhaps too pointed? The whole conversation takes off from the specific and incomparable tyranny of Macbeth, but in the process succeeds in suggesting that there may be considerable overlap between the qualities of the tyrant and the true king.

*Macbeth* allows space for two quite different interpretive organizations: against a Jamesian illustration of the virtues of Absolutism we may produce a disturbance of that reading, illuminated by Buchanan. This latter makes visible the way religion is used to underpin State ideology, and undermines notions that established monarchs must not be challenged or removed and that State violence is utterly distinctive and legitimate. It is commonly assumed that the function of criticism is to resolve such questions of interpretation—to go through the text with an eye to sources, other plays, theatrical convention, historical context and so on, deciding on which side the play comes down and explaining away contrary evidence. However, this is neither an adequate programme nor an adequate account of what generally happens.

Let us suppose, to keep the argument moving along, that the Jamesian reading fits better with *Macbeth* and its Jacobean context, as we understand them at present. Two questions then present themselves: what is the status of the disturbance of that reading, which I have produced by bringing Buchanan into view? And what are the consequences of customary critical insistence upon the Jamesian reading?

On the first question, I would make three points. First, the Buchanan disturbance *is in the play*, and inevitably so. Even if we believe that Shakespeare was trying to smooth over difficulties in Absolutist ideology, to do this significantly he must deal with the issues which resist convenient inclusion. Those issues must be brought into visibility in order that they can be handled, and once exposed they are available for the reader or audience to seize and focus upon, as an alternative to the more complacent reading. A position tends to suppose an opposition. Even James's writings are vulnerable to such analysis, for instance when he brings up the awkward fact that the prophet Samuel urgently warns the people of Israel against choosing a king because he will tyrannize over them. This prominent biblical instance could hardly be ignored, so James quotes it and says that Samuel was preparing the Israelites to be obedient and patient.19 Yet once James has brought Samuel's pronouncement into visibility, the reader is at liberty to doubt the king's tendentious interpretation of it. It is hardly possible to deny the reader this scope: even the most strenuous closure can be repudiated as inadequate. We are led to think of the text not as propounding a unitary and coherent meaning which is to be discovered, but as handling a range of issues (probably intractable issues, for they make the best stories), and as unable to control the development of radically divergent interpretations.

Second, the Buchanan disturbance has been activated, in the present essay, as a consequence of the writer's scepticism about Jamesian ideological strategies and his concern with current political issues. It is conceivable that many readers of *Macbeth* will come to share this outlook. Whether this happens or not, the theoretical implication may be taken: if such a situation should come about, the terms in which *Macbeth* is customarily discussed would shift, and eventually the Buchanan disturbance would come to seem an obvious, natural way to consider the play. That is how notions of appropriate approaches to a text get established. We may observe the process, briefly, in the career of the Witches. For many members of Jacobean audiences, Witches were a social and spiritual reality: they were as real as Edward the Confessor, perhaps more so. As belief in the physical manifestation of supernatural powers, and especially demonic powers, weakened, the Witches were turned into an operatic display, with new scenes, singing and dancing, fine costumes and flying machines. In
an adaptation by Sir William Davenant, this was the only stage form of the play from 1674 to 1744, and even after Davenant's version was abandoned the Witches' divertissements were staged, until 1888. 

Latterly we have adopted other ways with the Witches—being still unable, of course, to contemplate them, as most of Shakespeare's audience probably did, as phenomena one might encounter on a heath. Kenneth Muir comments: 'with the fading of belief in the objective existence of devils, they and their operations can yet symbolize the workings of evil in the hearts of men' (New Arden *Macbeth*, p. lxx). Recent critical accounts and theatrical productions have developed all kinds of strategies to make the Witches 'work' for our time. These successive accommodations of one aspect of the play to prevailing attitudes are blatant, but they illustrate the extent to which critical orthodoxy is not the mere response to the text which it claims to be: it is *remaking* it within currently acceptable parameters. 

The Buchanan disturbance may not always remain a marginal gloss to the Jamesian reading. 

Third, we may assume that the Buchanan disturbance was part of the response of some among the play's initial audiences. It is in the nature of the matter that it is impossible to assess how many people inclined towards Buchanan's analysis of royal power. That there were such may be supposed from the multifarious challenges to State authority—culminating, of course, in the Civil War. *Macbeth* was almost certainly read against James by some Jacobean. This destroys the claim to privilege of the Jamesian reading on the ground that it is historically valid: we must envisage diverse original audiences, activating diverse implications in the text. And we may demand comparable interpretive license for ourselves. Initially the play occupied a complex position in its ideological field, and we should expect no less today. 

With these considerations about the status of the Buchanan disturbance in mind, the question about the customary insistence on the Jamesian reading appears as a question about the politics of criticism. Like other kinds of cultural production, literary criticism helps to influence the way people think about the world; that is why the present essay seeks to make space for an oppositional understanding of the text and the State. It is plain that most criticism has not only reproduced but endorsed Jamesian ideology, so discouraging scrutiny, which *Macbeth* can promote, of the legitimacy of State violence. That we are dealing with live issues is shown by the almost uncanny resemblances between the Gunpowder Plot and the 1984 Brighton Bombing, and in the comparable questions about State and other violence which they raise. My concluding thoughts are about the politics of the prevailing readings of *Macbeth*. I distinguish conservative and liberal positions; both tend to dignify their accounts with the honorific term 'tragedy'. 

The conservative position insists that the play is about 'evil'. Kenneth Muir offers a string of quotations to this effect: it is ‘Shakespeare’s “most profound and mature vision of evil”’; “the whole play may be writ down as a wrestling of destruction with creation”’; it is “a statement of evil”; “it is a picture of a special battle in a universal war ...”; and it “contains the decisive orientation of Shakespearean good and evil”’. 

This is little more than Jamesian ideology writ large: killing Macdonwald is 'good' and killing Duncan is 'evil', and the hierarchical society envisaged in Absolutist ideology is identified with the requirements of nature, supernature and the 'human condition'. Often this view is elaborated as a socio-political programme, allegedly expounded by Shakespeare and implicitly endorsed by the critic. So Muir writes of 'an orderly and closely-knit society, in contrast to the disorder consequent upon Macbeth's initial crime [i.e. killing Duncan, not Macdonwald]. The naturalness of that order, and the unnaturalness of its violation by Macbeth, is emphasized ...' (New Arden *Macbeth*, p. li). Irving Ribner says Fleance is ‘symbolic of a future rooted in the acceptance of natural law, which inevitably must return to reassert God's harmonious order when evil has worked itself out’. 

This conservative endorsement of Jamesian ideology is not intended to ratify the Modern State. Rather, like much twentieth-century literary criticism, it is backward-looking, appealing to an earlier and preferable supposed condition of society. Roger Scruton comments: 'If a conservative is also a restorationist, this is because he lives close to society, and feels in himself the sickness which infects the common order. How, then, can he fail to direct his eyes towards that state of health from which things have declined?' 

This quotation is close to the terms in which many critics write of *Macbeth*, and their evocation of the Jamesian
order which is allegedly restored at the end of the play constitutes a wistful gesture towards what they would regard as a happy ending for our troubled society. However, because this conservative approach is based on an inadequate analysis of political and social process, it gains no purchase on the main determinants of State power.

A liberal position hesitates to endorse any State power so directly, finding some saving virtue in Macbeth: ‘To the end he never totally loses our sympathy’; ‘we must still not lose our sympathy for the criminal’. In this view there is a flaw in the State, it fails to accommodate the particular consciousness of the refined individual. Macbeth's imagination is set against the blandness of normative convention and for all his transgressions, perhaps because of them, Macbeth transcends the laws he breaks. In John Bayley's version: ‘His superiority consists in a passionate sense for ordinary life, its seasons and priorities, a sense which his fellows in the play ignore in themselves or take for granted. Through the deed which tragedy requires of him he comes to know not only himself, but what life is all about.’ I call this 'liberal' because it is anxious about a State, Absolutist or Modern, which can hardly take cognizance of the individual sensibility, and it is prepared to validate to some degree the recalcitrant individual. But it will not undertake the political analysis which would press the case. Hence there is always in such criticism a reservation about Macbeth's revolt and a sense of relief that it ends in defeat: nothing could have been done anyway, it was all inevitable, written in the human condition. This retreat from the possibility of political analysis and action leaves the State virtually unquestioned, almost as fully as the conservative interpretation.

Shakespeare, notoriously, has a way of anticipating all possibilities. The idea of literary intellectuals identifying their own deepest intuitions of the universe in the experience of the ‘great’ tragic hero who defies the limits of the human condition is surely a little absurd; we may sense delusions of grandeur. Macbeth includes much more likely models for its conservative and liberal critics in the characters of the two doctors. The English Doctor has just four and a half lines (IV.iii.141-5) in which he says King Edward is coming and that sick people whose malady conquers the greatest efforts of medical skill await him, expecting a heavenly cure for ‘evil’. Malcolm, the king to be, says ‘I thank you, Doctor’. This doctor is the equivalent of conservative intellectuals who encourage respect for mystificatory images of ideal hierarchy which have served the State in the past, and who invoke ‘evil’, ‘tragedy’ and ‘the human condition’ to produce, in effect, acquiescence in State power.

The Scottish Doctor, in V.1 and V.iii, is actually invited to cure the sickness of the rulers and by implication the State: ‘If thou couldst, Doctor, cast / The water of my land, find her disease …’ (V.iii.50-1). But this doctor, like the liberal intellectual, hesitates to press an analysis. He says: ‘This disease is beyond my practice’ (V.1.56), ‘I think, but dare not speak’ (V.1.76), ‘Therain the patient / Must minister to himself’ (V.iii.45-6), ‘Were I from Dunsinane away and clear, / Profit again should hardly draw me here’ (V.iii.61-2). He wrings his hands at the evidence of State violence and protects his conscience with asides. This is like the liberal intellectual who knows there is something wrong at the heart of the system but will not envisage a radical alternative and, to ratify this attitude, discovers in Shakespeare's plays ‘tragedy’ and ‘the human condition’ as explanations of the supposedly inevitable defeat of the person who steps out of line.

By conventional standards, the present essay is perverse. But an oppositional criticism is bound to appear thus: its task is to work across the grain of customary assumptions and, if necessary, across the grain of the text, as it is customarily perceived. Of course, literary intellectuals don’t have much influence over State violence, their therapeutic power is very limited. Nevertheless, writing, teaching, and other modes of communicating all contribute to the steady, long-term formation of opinion, to the establishment of legitimacy. This contribution King James himself did not neglect. An oppositional analysis of texts like Macbeth will read them to expose, rather than promote, State ideologies.

Notes
15. *The Tyrannous Reign of Mary Stewart*, p. 49; see also p. 99.
18. However, as Jim McLaverty points out to me, the play has arranged that Macduff will not experience temptation from his wife. In the chronicles Malcolm's son is overthrown by Donalbain; in Polanski's film of *Macbeth* Donalbain is made to meet the Witches.


**Criticism: Ethics And Political Ideology: Barbara Riebling (essay date 1991)**


[In the following essay, Riebling analyzes Macbeth as a discourse in civic humanism, contrasting the principles of Machiavellian governance to those of Christianity.]

“I love my city more than I love my soul,” Machiavelli wrote in a letter to a friend. If we take him at his word—including the belief that he has a soul—Machiavelli is describing the ultimate patriotic sacrifice. In both of his major theoretical works, *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, he presents this sacrifice as more likely the deeper one ventures into politics, and as virtually unavoidable for the prince. Machiavelli's works shocked sixteenth-century audiences, who were accustomed to seeing Christian and civic virtue as interchangeable; in his version of truth, “la verità effettuale,” political virtù is ineluctably at odds with religion and its rules. The English were particularly appalled by Machiavelli's ideas; hence the enormous popularity in the late sixteenth century of the villainous “stage Machiavel.” For centuries medieval and Renaissance citizens had been assured of an essential harmony between religious and political truths—any apparent conflicts were resolved either by a rejection of worldly values or their procrustean fit to the Decalogue. English audiences by Shakespeare's time would have been familiar with a number of traditional religio-political models: the *de casibus* theme carried forward from Boccaccio through writers like Lydgate, that valorizes the contemplative life and presents earthly power and glory as transitory vanities; the providential view of political history in works like *Mirror for Magistrates* or the play *Cambises*, that sees divine justice acted out in the political realm; the picture of virtuous statecraft drawn by Christian humanists like Thomas Elyot and Erasmus, who equate effective rule with upright behavior and advise the prince to be nothing more nor less than a good Christian. In sharp contrast, Machiavelli boldly states that any prince who would take such advice and let go of what is done for what should be done studies his own ruin (*The Prince*, 15). In *The Discourses* he even goes so far as to blame Christianity for the triumph of evil in contemporary politics.1 Clearly, Machiavelli's views are not in harmony with the religious beliefs of his time. After his advent, Renaissance audiences are confronted by two antipathetic philosophies of state. Political life is played out either in a world bound to Christian rules of conduct or a delegitimized world cut loose from any rule but survival. The question I would like to raise is: which world does *Macbeth* inhabit?

For many years *Macbeth* was read as one of Shakespeare's most unambiguous works and analyzed as if it were a political-moral fable.2 More recent scholarship has attempted to place *Macbeth* within the context of conflicting ideologies of early seventeenth-century England and Scotland—as a response, for instance, to the clash of absolutism and resistance theory.3 I would like to suggest another context for the politics of the play, the discourse of civic humanism. In this context, *Macbeth* can be read specifically as a response to
Machiavelli’s most controversial models for effective rule. By the beginning of the seventeenth century in England, the real Machiavelli started to replace the “Machiavel,” opening the way for both the republicanism of The Discourses and the “ragione di stato” arguments in The Prince. An analysis of the portraits of kingship in Macbeth suggests that the play participates in this shift in political consciousness, reflecting standards of conduct that are far more Machiavellian than Christian.

Political tragedy studies the consequences of misrule, and Macbeth is no exception, censuring two extremes in civic malpractice. Although the majority of the play is taken up with Macbeth's criminal reign—a regime at odds with both Machiavellian and Christian precepts—Macbeth begins its exploration of tragic politics in Duncan's chaotic realm, presenting a brief but succinct portrait of the consequences of political innocence. Measured by traditional Christian values, Duncan's behavior is impeccable. By Machiavellian standards, it is a menace to himself and his people. Because Duncan's kingship can be admired from one perspective and condemned from the other, it serves as a locus for uncovering the play's ideological sympathies, particularly since Macbeth provides an alternative model of political virtue in Malcolm. At the beginning of the play, Duncan “rules” by the rules; later his son will “rule” by breaking them. These opposing images of the good king frame the portrait of Macbeth and his criminal regime, and it is Malcolm's politic practice that emerges as the normative standard against which both Duncan and Macbeth are measured.

The rebellion that almost destroys Duncan's kingdom is set in a Machiavellian context. A central theme of The Prince is Machiavelli's new take on the classic opposition of fortune and virtue. In late medieval philosophy Christian virtue could defeat the goddess Fortune by making a man indifferent to her blows. Machiavelli, however, argues that although a private individual can afford to hold the world in contempt, a prince has aggressively to impose his will upon it. He inverts the standard virtue-fortune model, stating that a man with sufficient virtù can violently conquer Fortuna (The Prince, 25). In the first act of Macbeth, the goddess Fortune is a battle prize tossed back and forth among virile warriors. Initially, Fortune is the “rebel's whore” who aids the traitorous Thanes (I.ii.15). But she is finally conquered by Macbeth, who “Disdaining” her, prefers instead to be “Valor's minion,” “Bellona's bridegroom” (I.ii.17, 54). Significantly, Duncan is left on the sidelines; in the delegitimized world of power struggle, his Christian virtue cannot come into play. In order to conquer Fortune he needs the virtù of men like Macbeth. However, according to Machiavelli, a prince cannot maintain his power by relying on the virtù of another; like the goddess, the state belongs to the man who wins her by force. It is for this reason Machiavelli advises that every prince should be his own best general and “never lift his thoughts from the exercise of war” (The Prince, 14). In Machiavelli's view, Duncan's delegation of the violent arts of war would be consistent with both Christian values and the eventual loss of his kingdom.

Machiavelli does not dismiss Christian virtues; he understands their appeal and acknowledges their prestige. In The Prince he instructs the ruler in the proper “use” of traditional virtues. If the times are peaceful and all men trustworthy, the prince can afford the luxury of moral practice. If, however, his state is insecure, he must cultivate an appearance of virtue while being willing to practice its opposite. In chapter 18 Machiavelli explains why it is dangerous for the prince to possess in actuality the virtues that he must always project:

Nay, I dare say this, that by having them [virtues] and always observing them, they are harmful; and by appearing to have them, they are useful, as it is to appear merciful, faithful, humane, honest, and religious, and to be so; but to remain with a spirit built so that, if you need not to be those things, you are able to know how to change to the contrary. This has to be understood: that a prince, and especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things for which men are held good, since he is often under the necessity, to maintain his state, of acting against faith, against charity, against humanity, against religion.

As this passage makes clear, Duncan, however admirable a man, is by Machiavellian standards a dangerous king—a ruler whose gentle and trusting character has invited treason, civil war, and foreign invasion. By
being a perfect Christian, Duncan succeeds in becoming a perfect lamb—a sacrificial offering on the altar of real-world politics.

Given the potentially deadly environment a prince must inhabit, Machiavelli recommends that his nature should combine two less endearing animals, the lion and the fox: “Thus, since a prince is compelled of necessity how to use the beast, he should pick the fox and the lion … one needs to be a fox to recognize snares and a lion to frighten wolves” (The Prince, 18). Because he sees survival as a prince's first duty, Machiavelli selects for emulation animals known for their survival skills rather than their service to others. Although this advice may seem to be nothing more than the glorification of self-interest, it can be argued that altruistic virtues will be of little value to the prince or his kingdom if they open the way to his destruction and die with him, along with countless subjects. At the beginning of Macbeth, Duncan displays the kind of fatal naïveté characteristic of a prince who possesses virtù. Mystified by Cawdor's treason, he states,

To find the mind’s construction in the face:
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust.

(I.iv.12-15)

Duncan admits that he cannot penetrate appearances, yet he tries to build his kingdom on relationships of “absolute trust.” The Machiavellian prince, on the other hand, has mastered the art of seeing into others while remaining a mystery himself, and he is utterly self-reliant. In chapter 17 of The Prince, Machiavelli warns against depending on the love and loyalty of one's followers. He calls the generality of men “ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and dissemblers,” and urges the prince to build his kingdom on fear rather than love since love is “held by a chain of obligation, which, because men are wicked, is broken at every opportunity for their own utility, but fear is held by a dread of punishment that never forsakes you” (The Prince, 17).

Duncan's faith and trust cost him his life. But it is through his death that his son Malcolm learns the art of survival. Machiavelli considered the prince fortunate to found his state in adversity since the struggle instructs him in the ways of maintaining power (The Prince, 20). Indeed, by the end of the play, Malcolm's fortunes seem to have transformed him into a total Machiavellian. Immediately following his father's murder, Malcolm wishes to speak his heart, but his brother stops him, considering it more prudent to run than to stay and protest against a hidden and deadly enemy (II.iii.118-25). By Act IV, scene iii, Malcolm has acquired virtù, which is above all else the art of prudence. He tells Macduff, who has come from Scotland to offer his services to the prince in exile, that he cannot depend on a mere verbal assurance of Macduff’s virtuous intent. After all, as Malcolm points out, “This tyrant whose sole name blisters our tongue / Was once thought honest” (IV.iii.11-12). He suspects that Macduff may be trying to ingratiate himself with Macbeth by offering him up “a weak, poor, innocent lamb / T’appease an angry god” (IV.iii.16-17). However, unlike his father, Malcolm is more fox than lamb, and although he maintains that he cannot know what is in a man's heart, he has learned to attain some measure of control over a world of deception by turning dissimulation itself into a tool. In other words, he has learned to “rule” by breaking the rules of Christian conduct. He tests Macduff's virtue by pretending to every vice a tyrant proverbially possessed. In this Machiavellian test, a virtuous man dissimulates (a non-virtuous act) that he is not virtuous in order to prove that the object of his test is virtuous. And it is not until Macduff violently rejects him (“Fit to govern? / No, not to live”) that he can accept Macduff. Malcolm has put into practice what Machiavelli recommends in chapter 18 of The Prince: “How laudable it is for a prince to keep his faith, and live with honesty and not by astuteness, everyone understands. Nonetheless one sees by experience in our times that the princes who have done great things are those who have taken little account of faith and have known how to get around men's brains with their astuteness; and in the end they have overcome those who have founded themselves on loyalty.”
The exchange between Malcolm and Macduff is not only interesting as a Machiavellian demonstration of “how to get around men's brains,” it also reveals the extent to which conventional rule-bound notions of ethical conduct have yielded to moral concepts that are prudential or ends-oriented. In the area of religious practice, late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England is witness to a growing adiaphorism which relegated to the realm of things indifferent all matters that do not directly affect salvation. At the same time, James I asserts a political adiaphora which contains any royal vice that does not directly affect the state. These developments in English religious and political ideology harmonize with Machiavellian notions of civic virtue that subordinate personal morality to considerations of political consequence. Thus during the testing scene, Macduff can promise that Scotland will accommodate a series of personal vices—deceit, lust, avarice—but he rejects Malcolm as a king when his vices turn political:

Nay, had I pow'r, I should
Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell,
Uproar the universal peace, confound
All unity on earth.

(IV.iii.97-100)

The scene between Malcolm and Macduff not only illustrates concepts of virtue that subordinate traditional rules of Christian conduct to the pressing needs of troubled times; it also succeeds in cloaking Malcolm's true nature in an impenetrable veil. When Malcolm “unspeaks” the crimes he has just laid upon himself, claiming that he is a virgin who has never before lied or broken faith, Macduff is struck dumb with confusion. Malcolm's claims of perfect innocence and honesty are incredible under any circumstances but particularly since they are belied by the speech that asserts them. After this virtùoso display of politic dissimulation, it becomes impossible for Macduff, or the audience, to get a precise fix on Malcolm. He has successfully cultivated the “mystery of state” that is characteristic of both Machiavellian theory and absolutist practice.

Before Malcolm tests Macduff's honesty by lying, the breakdown of an easy equivalence between being “true” literally and politically has been introduced in a conversation where the subject is also Macduff's loyalty—the exchange between Lady Macduff and her son moments before their murder. The boy asks if his father is really a traitor, and when his mother replies that he is, he wants a definition of treason:

Son. What is a traitor?
L. Macd. Why, one that swears and lies.
Son. And be all traitors that do so?
L. Macd. Every one that does so is a traitor, and must be hang'd.
Son. And must they all be hang'd that swear and lie?
L. Macd. Every one.
Son. Who must hang them?
L. Macd. Why, the honest men.
Son. Then the liars and swearers are fools; for there are liars and swearers enow to beat the honest men and hang up them.

(IV.ii.46-58)

Lady Macduff's definition of treason is never meant to be taken seriously, quickly collapsing in the face of her son's simple “reality test.” However, her explanation of the supreme crime against the state echoes the political writings of Christian humanists, who insist that political evil is identical to religious sin. Lady Macduff's equating treason with breaking the second and ninth commandments has serious philosophical
precedent, and the ease with which that equation is dismissed by her son is a reflection of the erosion these views have undergone by the early seventeenth century. Thus Shakespeare's domestic exchange illustrates that by this time even a child knows what political writers from Cicero to Suarez vigorously deny—lying is not treason; as the world goes, it is a ubiquitous tool of survival.

Given his strength, courage, and willingness to commit evil, Macbeth might seem to be Machiavelli's ideal prince. Actually, he manages to fall short in several regards, not the least of which is his inability to dissimulate. From the moment he hears the witches' prediction, his ambition becomes transparent. He attracts Banquo's suspicion early on, and he has to be instructed by Lady Macbeth to hide his feelings from the first moment she sees him:

Your face, my thane, is as a book, where men
May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue; look like th' innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't.

(I.v.62-66)

His acting abilities hardly improve once he becomes king. The play is filled with references to Macbeth's ill-fitting costumes (I.iii.144-46; V.ii.20-23), references which are usually read as symbols of Macbeth's inability to "fill Duncan's shoes." I would like to suggest that these costumes which never seem to fit may also refer to Macbeth's incompetence at maintaining illusion. The mask of the "mystery of state" keeps slipping, revealing Macbeth's naked face—filled with ambition, fear, hatred—for anyone to read. He reveals fear and guilt in the banquet scene in front of the assembled lords of Scotland, and Macduff senses danger in time to escape his grasp. The sarcastic exchange between Lennox and another lord in Act III, scene vi, reveals that not one of his attempts to shift the blame for his crimes has succeeded. One tactic for which Machiavelli praises Borgia is his use of Rimiro de Orca; Rimiro commits all of the crimes necessary to pacify the Romagna, and once the people begin to hate him for his cruelty, he is killed, leaving Borgia both secure and popular. Unlike Borgia, Macbeth carries the personal stigma of every crime in his realm.

However, by Machiavellian standards Macbeth's greatest sin would probably be not his inability to dissimulate but his initial reluctance to commit totally to the course of wrongdoing that his position as usurping prince has made essential. In The Discourses Machiavelli praises the wisdom of those who prefer to live as private citizens rather than suffer the guilt all kings must incur. He goes on to warn against the greatest danger, the desire to have it all—the clean conscience of a private man and the power of a prince. Having just described the means by which Philip of Macedon made himself prince of Greece, Machiavelli states:

Such methods are exceedingly cruel, and are repugnant to any community, not only a Christian one, but to any composed of men. It behaves, therefore, every man to shun them, and to prefer rather to live as a private citizen than as a king with such ruination of men to his score. None the less, for the sort of man who is unwilling to take up this first course of well doing, it is expedient, should he wish to hold what he has, to enter on the path of wrong doing. Actually, however, most men prefer to steer a middle course, which is very harmful; for they know not how to be wholly good nor yet wholly bad.

(Bk. 1, chap. 26)

Machiavelli's complaint about men's longing to attain power without sacrificing personal virtue sounds very much like Lady Macbeth's fears concerning her husband's double desire:

Thou wouldst be great,
One can see Macbeth's deep desire to be "holy" and yet "wrongly win" in Act II, scene ii, where, incredibly, he seeks a blessing by trying to join his own "Amen" to the prayer of two sleeping innocents seconds after he has murdered Duncan; it seems genuinely to surprise him that the "Amen" sticks in his throat (II.ii.24-31). Macbeth is like the Porter's "equivocator," a man who wants it all and "could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven" (II.iii.8-11).

It is a delicate issue to argue that Scotland would have been better off had Macbeth been more thoroughly evil—especially since Macbeth becomes evil incarnate by the end of the play. What Machiavelli would argue is that Macbeth's conversion comes too late for himself and for the kingdom. In Act I Macbeth wants his murder of Duncan to be a single, limited crime, and he alternates between fantasizing an assassination that "Could trammel up the consequences," and the realization that he may not be able to control what will follow. By murdering Duncan, and Duncan alone, Macbeth's worst fears come true. He unleashes a flood of events that so outrace his efforts at containment that he finally resorts to a reign of terror. In what must be the most troubling passages in The Prince, chapters 7 and 8 on Borgia and Agathocles, Machiavelli distinguishes between cruelties that are well or badly used:

Someone could question how it happened that Agathocles and anyone like him, after infinite betrayals and cruelties, could live for a long time secure in his fatherland, defend himself against external enemies, and never be conspired against by his citizens, inasmuch as many others have not been able to maintain their states through cruelty even in peaceful times, not to mention uncertain times of war. I believe that this comes from cruelties badly used or well used. Those can be called well used (if it is permissible to speak well of evil) that are done at a stroke, out of the necessity to secure oneself, and then are not persisted in but are turned to as much utility for the subjects as one can. Those cruelties are badly used which, though few in the beginning, rather grow with time than are eliminated. Those who observe the first mode can have some remedy for their state with God and with men, as had Agathocles.

Machiavelli's condemnation of "cruelties badly used" could easily serve as a gloss to Macbeth, where the crimes are few in the beginning but do indeed grow with time. It is particularly interesting to note that Machiavelli brings in the judgment of God as well as men; both distinguish between these two cruelties and both find only the latter beyond remedy. Machiavelli can praise Borgia and Agathocles, and even offer them a kind of divine dispensation, because his perspective is "of the people" (The Prince, dedicatory letter). He is not interested in the personal virtue of the prince, only in the effect of his actions on the kingdom. Since the civil chaos and terror that follow innocent blunders and half-hearted crimes are more deadly to the people than the quick and ruthless pacification of a kingdom, Machiavelli saves his condemnation for those princes whose actions cost the most lives.

Machiavelli warns against the dangers of traveling the "middle course" throughout his works. He states in The Prince that men should either be "caressed or eliminated" (3). In both The Prince and The Discourses, he particularly emphasizes the importance of eliminating the blood line of the former ruler when founding a new kingdom (The Prince, 3; The Discourses, Bk. 3, chap. 4). Macbeth's failures in this regard are obvious. He lets Malcolm and Donalbain escape after having done them the gravest injuries. And because he feels insecure from the moment he seizes power, he continues to murder in order to feel safe: "to be thus is nothing / But to be safely thus" (III.i.48-49). When he speaks to Lady Macbeth about his fears, he illustrates the escalation of
violence that follows from half-hearted measures:

We have scorch’d the snake, not kill’d it;
She’ll close and be herself, whilst our poor malice
Remains in danger of her former tooth.
But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer,
Ere we will eat our meal in fear.

(III.ii.13-17)

He ends the scene with a reiteration of the same concept—increased evil to secure their shaky position: “Thou marvel’st at my words, but hold thee still: / Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill” (III.ii.54-55). But after his initial crime, no matter how willingly or quickly he kills, it never seems to be enough. Having begun his crimes by killing Duncan while allowing his heirs to escape, he will crown them by killing all of Macduff's heirs after allowing Macduff to escape. The violence increases exponentially, but its efficacy decreases at an even higher rate.

Machiavelli never praises brutality for its own sake; he advocates its politic use as a necessary evil, a prophylactic against widespread and indiscriminate violence. He is particularly critical of the kinds of cruel actions that breed mayhem; and more than any other political writer, he understands the destructive power of vengeance. When in chapter 17 of *The Prince* he advises that it is better to be feared than to be loved, he adds an important caveat—one should be feared but never hated. In chapter 20 he discusses fortifications and concludes, “the best fortress there is, is not to be hated by the people, because although you may have fortresses, if the people hold you in hatred fortresses do not save you; for to people who have taken up arms foreigners will never be lacking to come to their aid.” By committing acts like the massacre of Macduff's family, Macbeth has become universally hated. He faces an avenging army, aided by a foreign king, with nothing at his back but a fortress, soldiers in revolt, and “Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath / Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not” (V.iii.27-28). Shortly after this speech, Macbeth will be defeated and decapitated. Machiavelli would have predicted his violent end, but not on providential grounds. He would have seen Macbeth's destruction as no more or less inevitable than Duncan's—both of Shakespeare's portraits in political disaster could have found a place among his vast collection of object lessons in virtù and the art of survival.

**Notes**

1. In *The Discourses* Niccolò Machiavelli rails against Christianity's effect on political life. Unlike the state religion of the Romans, Christianity holds the world and its glories in contempt:

Our religion has glorified humble and contemplative men, rather than men of action.
It has assigned as man's highest good humility, abnegation, and contempt for mundane things [cosi umane], whereas the other identified it with magnanimity, bodily strength, and everything else that conduces to make men very bold. And, if our religion demands that in you there be strength, what it asks for is the strength to suffer rather than the strength to do bold things.

This pattern of life, therefore, appears to have made the world weak, and to have handed it over as prey to the wicked, who run it successfully and securely since they are well aware that the generality of men, with paradise for their goal, consider how best to bear, rather than how best to avenge, their injuries.

(Bk. 2, chap. 2)


4. The reception of Machiavelli in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was a welter of contradictions; however, it is clear that by the seventeenth century his philosophy was beginning to gain respectability. For detailed accounts of the extent and levels of Machiavellianism, open and covert, see Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli* (London: Routledge, 1964), and the recent study by Peter S. Donaldson, *Machiavelli and the Mystery of State* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988). As Donaldson's investigations have confirmed, there were a number of avid followers of Machiavelli in the early Tudor courts—among others, William Thomas, who wrote a secret work of royal pedagogy based on Machiavelli's works for the young prince Edward VI, and Bishop Stephen Gardiner, who wrote a Machiavellian treatise for Mary's consort, Philip of Spain.

By the late sixteenth century many of Machiavelli's most controversial ideas were also gaining ground in public political discourse, although authors often avoided defending him by name. For instance, in an English translation of *The Six Bookes of Politickes or Civil Doctrine* (trans. William Jones, London, 1594), Justus Lipsius, a writer noted for his piety, praises the politic use of deception and actively defends Machiavelli (identified in a marginal note):

"Surely when one is not strong enough to debate in the matter, it is not amisse secretly to intrappe. And as the King of Sparta teacheth us, where we cannot prevale by the Lions skinne, we must put on the Foxes. … Of such a person we shall easily obtaine this; neither will he so strictly condemne the Italian fault-writer, (who poore soule is layde at of all hands) and as a holy person sayth, that there is a certaine honest and laudable deceipt."

(p. 114)


5. All quotations are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

6. Machiavelli's attitude towards self-interest is clearly expressed in one of his poems, “Tercets on Ambition” in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, 3 vols., trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1965), 2: 735-39. He sees personal ambition as a great evil unless it is harnessed by the state and its energies turned against her enemies. If it is allowed to rage unchecked within a kingdom the results are reminiscent of Macbeth's Scotland: “Wherever you turn your eyes, you see the earth wet with tears / and blood, and the air full of screams, sobs, and sighs” (lines 157-58).

7. It has long been noted that Machiavelli has a very “Protestant” conception of human nature. See for example, Hiram Haydn's *The Counter-Renaissance* (New York: Scribner's, 1950) for a discussion of Calvin and the Florentine school. One can also see an affinity with Luther, whose bleak view of humanity is the basis on which he justifies the need for coercive government: without rule by force, “seeing that the whole world is evil and that among thousands there is scarcely one true Christian,
men would devour one another, and no one could preserve wife and child, support himself and serve God; and thus the world would be reduced to chaos.” Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 370. These views of man's nature, along with the antinomianism inherent in the doctrine of election (which does not contain a rule-bound view of virtue), contribute to a world-view receptive to both absolutism and civic humanism. Thus as England became more Protestant and more absolutist, it became more hospitable to Machiavelli.

8. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between Machiavellian virtù and prudence see Eugene Garver's Machiavelli and the History of Prudence (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987). Garver states: “Machiavelli ‘empties’ virtù of its conventional semantic, moral, and intellectual associations in order to substitute a prudential structure for understanding it” (p. 31).

9. See Victoria Kahn's article, “Virtù and the Example of Agathocles in Machiavelli’s Prince,” Representations 13 (Winter 1986): 63-83, for a discussion of the breakdown of the Ciceronian equation of honestas and utilitas (if a statement is true it will be effective) subscribed to by Christian humanists. Kahn points out Machiavelli’s adoption of an ironic mode of discourse that achieves its ends by seeming to speak against them.

10. See Rebecca W. Bushnell's Tragedies of Tyrants: Political Thought and Theater in the English Renaissance (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990) for a detailed discussion of the character of the tyrant in classical and Renaissance political theory and theater. He was conventionally conceived as a slave to desire and therefore subject to any number of appetitive vices.

11. In Basilikon Doron, James I separates the King’s personal conduct from the rest of the work in a book labeled, “Of a King's Behaviour in Indifferent Things.” Earlier in the work he admits every king has his faults, but insists that they are to be kept between him and God and “should not be a matter of discourse to others whatsoever.” The Political Works of James I, 1616, intro. Charles Howard McIlwain (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), p. 21.

12. Bushnell notes the relationship between absolutist notions that relegate personal sins to the adiaphora and this turn in Macduff’s attitude (pp. 140-42).


   On the one hand virtù is that by which we innovate, and so let loose sequences of contingency beyond our prediction or control so that we become prey to fortuna; on the other hand, virtù is that internal to ourselves by which we resist fortuna and impose upon her patterns of order, which may even become patterns of moral order. This seems to be at the heart of Machiavellian ambiguities. It explains why innovation is supremely difficult, being formally self-destructive; and it explains why there is incompatibility between action—and so between politics defined in terms of action rather than tradition—and moral order.

(p. 167)

Criticism: Gender Issues: Janet Adelman (essay date 1985)
In the last moments of any production of Macbeth, as Macbeth feels himself increasingly hemmed in by enemies, the stage will resonate hauntingly with variants of his repeated question, “What’s he / That was not born of woman?” (5.7.2-3; for variants, see 5.3.4, 6; 5.7.11, 13; 5.8.13, 31). Repeated seven times, Macbeth's allusion to the witches' prophecy—“none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (4.1.80-81)—becomes virtually a talisman to ward off danger; even after he has begun to doubt the equivocation of the fiend (5.5.43), mere repetition of the phrase seems to Macbeth to guarantee his invulnerability. I want in this essay to explore the power of these resonances, particularly to explore how Macbeth's assurance seems to turn itself inside out, becoming dependent not on the fact that all men are, after all, born of woman but on the fantasy of escape from this universal condition. The duplicity of Macbeth's repeated question—its capacity to mean both itself and its opposite—carries such weight at the end of the play, I think, because the whole of the play represents in very powerful form both the fantasy of a virtually absolute and destructive maternal power and the fantasy of absolute escape from this power; I shall argue in fact that the peculiar texture of the end of the play is generated partly by the tension between these two fantasies.

Maternal power in Macbeth is not embodied in the figure of a particular mother (as it is, for example, in Coriolanus); it is instead diffused throughout the play, evoked primarily by the figures of the witches and Lady Macbeth. Largely through Macbeth's relationship to them, the play becomes (like Coriolanus) a representation of primitive fears about male identity and autonomy itself, about those looming female presences who threaten to control one's actions and one's mind, to constitute one's very self, even at a distance. When Macbeth's first words echo those we have already heard the witches speak—“So fair and foul a day I have not seen” (1.3.38); “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (1.1.11)—we are in a realm that questions the very possibility of autonomous identity. The play will finally reimagine autonomous male identity, but only through the ruthless excision of all female presence, its own peculiar satisfaction of the witches' prophecy.

In 1600, after the Earl of Gowrie's failed attempt to kill James VI, one James Weimis of Bog, testifying about the earl's recourse to necromancy, reported that the earl thought it "possible that the seed of man and woman might be brought to perfection otherwise then by the matrix of the woman." Whether or not Shakespeare deliberately recalled Gowrie in his portrayal of the murderer of James's ancestor, the connection is haunting: the account of the conspiracy hints that, for Gowrie at least, recourse to necromancy seemed to promise at once invulnerability and escape from the maternal matrix. The fantasy of such escape in fact haunts Shakespeare's plays. A few years after Macbeth, Posthumus will make the fantasy explicit: attributing all ills in man to the “woman's part,” he will ask, “Is there no way for men to be, but women / Must be half-workers?” (Cymbeline, 2.5.1-2). The strikingly motherless world of The Tempest and its potent image of absolute male control answers Posthumus' questions affirmatively: there at least, on that bare island, mothers and witches are banished and creation belongs to the male alone.

Even in one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, male autonomy is ambivalently portrayed as the capacity to escape the maternal matrix that has misshaped the infant man. The man who will become Richard III emerges strikingly as a character for the first time as he watches his brother Edward's sexual success with the Lady Grey. After wishing syphilis on him so that he will have no issue (a concern that anticipates Macbeth's), Richard constructs his own desire for the crown specifically as compensation for his failure at the sexual game. Unable to “make [his] heaven in a lady's lap,” he will “make [his] heaven to dream upon the crown” (3 Henry VI, 3.2.148,169). But his failure to make his heaven in a lady's lap is itself understood as the consequence of his subjection to another lady's lap, to the misshaping power of his mother's womb:
Why, love forswore me in my Mother's womb;
And, for I should not deal in her soft laws,
She did corrupt frail nature with some bribe
To shrink mine arm up like a withered shrub;
To make an envious mountain on my back.

[3.2.153-57]

Richard blames his deformity on a triad of female powers: Mother, Love, and Nature all fuse, conspiring to deform him as he is being formed in his mother's womb. Given this image of female power, it is no wonder that he turns to the compensatory heaven of the crown. But the crown turns out to be an unstable compensation. Even as he shifts from the image of the misshaping womb to the image of the crown, the terrifying enclosure of the womb recurs, shaping his attempt to imagine the very political project that should free him from dependence on ladies' laps:

I’ll make my heaven to dream upon the crown
And, whiles I live, t’account this world but hell
Until my misshaped trunk that bears this head
Be round impalèd with a glorious crown.
And yet I know not how to get the crown,
For many lives stand between me and home;
And I—like one lost in a thorny wood,
That rents the thorns and is rent with the thorns,
Seeking a way and straying from the way,
Not knowing how to find the open air
But toiling desperately to find it out—
Torment myself to catch the English crown;
And from that torment I will free myself
Or hew my way out with a bloody axe.

[3.2.168-81]

The crown for him is “home,” the safe haven. But through the shifting meaning of “impalèd,” the crown as safe haven is itself transformed into the dangerous enclosure: the stakes that enclose him protectively turn into the thorns that threaten to impale him. Strikingly, it is not his head but the trunk that bears his head that is so impaled by crown and thorns: the crown compensatory for ladies' laps fuses with the image of the dangerous womb in an imagistic nightmare in which the lap/womb/home/crown become the thorny wood from which he desperately seeks escape into the open air. Through this imagistic transformation, these lines take on the configuration of a birth fantasy, or more precisely a fantasy of impeded birth, a birth that the man-child himself must manage by hewing his way out with a bloody axe. Escape from the dangerous female is here achieved by recourse to the exaggeratedly masculine bloody axe. This, I will argue, is precisely the psychological configuration of Macbeth, where dangerous female presences like Love, Nature, Mother are given embodiment in Lady Macbeth and the witches, and where Macbeth wields the bloody axe in an attempt to escape their dominion over him.

At first glance, Macbeth seems to wield the bloody axe to comply with, not to escape, the dominion of women. The play constructs Macbeth as terrifyingly pawn to female figures. Whether or not he is rapt by the witches' prophecies because the horrid image of Duncan's murder has already occurred to him, their role as gleeful prophets constructs Macbeth's actions in part as the enactments of their will. And he is impelled toward murder by Lady Macbeth's equation of masculinity and murder: in his case, the bloody axe seems not an escape route but the tool of a man driven to enact the ferociously masculine strivings of his wife. Nonetheless, the weight given the image of the man not born of woman at the end suggests that the underlying fantasy is the same as in Richard's defensive construction of his masculinity: even while enacting the wills of women, Macbeth's bloody masculinity enables an escape from them in fantasy—an escape that the play itself
embodies in dramatic form at the end. I will discuss first the unleashing of female power and Macbeth's compliance with that power, and then the fantasy of escape.

In the figures of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and the witches, the play gives us images of a masculinity and a femininity that are terribly disturbed; this disturbance seems to me both the cause and the consequence of the murder of Duncan. In Hamlet, Shakespeare had reconstructed the Fall as the death of the ideal father; here, he constructs a revised version in which the Fall is the death of the ideally androgynous parent. For Duncan combines in himself the attributes of both father and mother: he is the center of authority, the source of lineage and honor, the giver of name and gift; but he is also the source of all nurturance, planting the children to his throne and making them grow. He is the father as androgynous parent from whom, singly, all good can be imagined to flow, the source of a benign and empowering nurturance the opposite of that imaged in the witches' poisonous cauldron and lady Macbeth's gall-filled breasts. Such a father does away with any need for a mother: he is the image of both parents in one, threatening aspects of each controlled by the presence of the other. When he is gone, “The wine of life is drawn, and the mere less / Is left this vault to brag of” (2.3.93-94): nurturance itself is spoiled, as all the play's imagery of poisoned chalices and interrupted feasts implies. In his absence male and female break apart, the female becoming merely helpless or merely poisonous and the male merely bloodthirsty; the harmonious relation of the genders imaged in Duncan fails.

In Hamlet, the absence of the ideal protecting father brings the son face to face with maternal power. The absence of Duncan similarly unleashes the power of the play's malevolent mothers. But this father-king seems strikingly absent even before his murder. Heavily idealized, he is nonetheless largely ineffectual: even while he is alive, he is unable to hold his kingdom together, reliant on a series of bloody men to suppress an increasingly successful series of rebellions. The witches are already abroad in his realm; they in fact constitute our introduction to that realm. Duncan, not Macbeth, is the first person to echo them (“When the battle's lost and won” [1.1.4]; “What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won” [1.2.69]). The witches' sexual ambiguity terrifies: Banquo says of them, “You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so” (1.3.45-47). Is their androgyny the shadow-side of the King's, enabled perhaps by his failure to maintain a protective masculine authority? Is their strength a consequence of his weakness? (This is the configuration of Cymbeline, where the power of the witch-queen-stepmother is so dependent on the failure of Cymbeline's masculine authority that she obligingly dies when that authority returns to him.) Banquo's question to the witches may ask us to hear a counterquestion about Duncan, who should be man. For Duncan's androgyny is the object of enormous ambivalence: idealized for his nurturing paternity, he is nonetheless killed for his womanish softness, his childish trust, his inability to read men's minds in their faces, his reliance on the fighting of sons who can rebel against him. Macbeth's description of the dead Duncan—“his silver skin lac'd with his golden blood” (2.3.110)—makes him into a virtual icon of kingly worth; but other images surrounding his death make him into an emblem not of masculine authority, but of female vulnerability. As he moves toward the murder, Macbeth first imagines himself the allegorical figure of murder, as though to absolve himself of the responsibility of choice. But the figure of murder then fuses with that of Tarquin:

... thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost.

[2.1.52-56]

These lines figure the murder as a display of male sexual aggression against a passive female victim: murder here becomes rape; Macbeth's victim becomes not the powerful male figure of the king, but the helpless Lucrece. Hardened by Lady Macbeth to regard maleness and violence as equivalent, that is, Macbeth responds to Duncan's idealized milky gentleness as though it were evidence of his femaleness. The horror of
this gender transformation, as well as the horror of the murder, is implicit in Macduff's identification of the king's body as a new Gorgon (“Approach the chamber, and destroy your sight / With a new Gorgon” [2.3.70-71]). The power of this image lies partly in its suggestion that Duncan's bloodied body, with its multiple wounds, has been revealed as female and hence blinding to his sons: as if the threat all along was that Duncan would be revealed as female and that this revelation would rob his sons of his masculine protection and hence of their own masculinity.14

In *King Lear*, the abdication of protective paternal power seems to release the destructive power of a female chaos imaged not only in Goneril and Regan, but also in the storm on the heath. Macbeth virtually alludes to Lear's storm as he approaches the witches in act 4, conjuring them to answer though they “untie the winds, and let them fight / Against the Churches,” though the “waves / Confound and swallow navigation up,” though “the treasure / Of Nature's germens tumble all together / Even till destruction sicken” (4.1.52-60; see *King Lear*, 3.2.1-9). The witches merely implicit on Lear's heath have become in *Macbeth* embodied agents of storm and disorder,15 and they are there from the start. Their presence suggests that the absence of the father that unleashes female chaos (as in *Lear*) has already happened at the beginning of *Macbeth*; that absence is merely made literal in Macbeth's murder of Duncan at the instigation of female forces. For this father-king cannot protect his sons from powerful mothers, and it is the son's—and the play's—revenge to kill him, or, more precisely, to kill him first and love him after, paying him back for his excessively “womanish” trust and then memorializing him as the ideal androgynous parent.16 The reconstitution of manhood becomes a central problem of the play in part, I think, because the vision of manhood embodied in Duncan has already failed at the play’s beginning.

The witches constitute our introduction to the realm of maternal malevolence unleashed by the loss of paternal protection; as soon as Macbeth meets them, he becomes (in Hecate's probably non-Shakespearean words) their “wayward son” (3.5.11). This maternal malevolence is given its most horrifying expression in Shakespeare in the image through which Lady Macbeth secures her control over Macbeth:

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How tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash’d the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.
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[1.7.54-59]

This image of murderously disrupted nurturance is the psychic equivalence of the witches' poisonous cauldron; both function to subject Macbeth's will to female forces.17 For the play strikingly constructs the fantasy of subjection to maternal malevolence in two parts, in the witches and in Lady Macbeth, and then persistently identifies the two parts as one. Through this identification, Shakespeare in effect locates the source of his culture's fear of witchcraft in individual human history, in the infant's long dependence on female figures felt as all-powerful: what the witches suggest about the vulnerability of men to female power on the cosmic plane, Lady Macbeth doubles on the psychological plane.

Lady Macbeth's power as a female temptress allies her in a general way with the witches as soon as we see her. The specifics of that implied alliance begin to emerge as she attempts to harden herself in preparation for hardening her husband: the disturbance of gender that Banquo registers when he first meets the witches is played out in psychological terms in Lady Macbeth's attempt to unsex herself. Calling on spirits ambiguously allied with the witches themselves, she phrases this unsexing as the undoing of her own bodily maternal function:

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Come, you Spirits
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I have given suck, and know
How tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash’d the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.
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[1.7.54-59]
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood,
Stop up th’access and passage to remorse;
That no compunctious visitings of Nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th’effect and it! Come to my woman’s breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murth’ring ministers.

[1.5.40-48]

In the play's context of unnatural births, the thickening of the blood and the stopping up of access and passage to remorse begin to sound like attempts to undo reproductive functioning and perhaps to stop the menstrual blood that is the sign of its potential. The metaphors in which Lady Macbeth frames the stopping up of remorse, that is, suggest that she imagines an attack on the reproductive passages of her own body, on what makes her specifically female. And as she invites the spirits to her breasts, she reiterates the centrality of the attack specifically on maternal function: needing to undo the “milk of human kindness” (1.5.18) in Macbeth, she imagines an attack on her own literal milk, its transformation into gall. This imagery locates the horror of the scene in Lady Macbeth's unnatural abrogation of her maternal function. But latent within this image of unsexing is the horror of the maternal function itself. Most modern editors follow Johnson in glossing “take my milk for gall” as “take my milk in exchange for gall,” imagining in effect that the spirits empty out the natural maternal fluid and replace it with the unnatural and poisonous one. But perhaps Lady Macbeth is asking the spirits to take her milk as gall, to nurse from her breast and find in her milk their sustaining poison. Here the milk itself is the gall; no transformation is necessary. In these lines Lady Macbeth focuses the culture's fear of maternal nursery—a fear reflected, for example, in the common worries about the various ills (including female blood itself) that could be transmitted through nursing and in the sometime identification of colostrum as witch's milk. Insofar as her milk itself nurtures the evil spirits, Lady Macbeth localizes the image of maternal danger, inviting the identification of her maternal function itself with that of the witch. For she here invites precisely that nursing of devil-imps so central to the current understanding of witchcraft that the presence of supernumerary teats alone was often taken as sufficient evidence that one was a witch. Lady Macbeth and the witches fuse at this moment, and they fuse through the image of perverse nursery.

It is characteristic of the play's division of labor between Lady Macbeth and the witches that she, rather than they, is given the imagery of perverse nursery traditionally attributed to the witches. The often noted alliance between Lady Macbeth and the witches constructs malignant female power both in the cosmos and in the family; it in effect adds the whole weight of the spiritual order to the condemnation of Lady Macbeth's insurrection. But despite the superior cosmic status of the witches, Lady Macbeth seems to me finally the more frightening figure. For Shakespeare's witches are an odd mixture of the terrifying and the near comic. Even without consideration of the Hecate scene (3.5) with its distinct lightening of tone and its incipient comedy of discord among the witches, we may begin to feel a shift toward the comic in the presentation of the witches: the specificity and predictability of the ingredients in their dire recipe pass over toward grotesque comedy even while they create a (partly pleasurable) shiver of horror. There is a distinct weakening of their power after their first appearances: only halfway through the play, in 4.1, do we hear that they themselves have masters (4.1.63). The more Macbeth claims for them, the less their actual power seems: by the time Macbeth evokes the cosmic damage they can wreak (4.1.50-60), we have already felt the presence of such damage, and felt it moreover not as issuing from the witches but as a divinely sanctioned nature's expressions of outrage at the disruption of patriarchal order. The witches' displays of thunder and lightning, like their apparitions, are mere theatrics compared to what we have already heard; and the serious disruptions of natural order—the storm that toppled the chimneys and made the earth shake (2.3.53-60), the unnatural darkness in day (2.4.5-10), the cannibalism of Duncan's horses (2.4.14-18)—seem the horrifying but reassuringly familiar signs of God's displeasure, firmly under His—not their—control. Partly because their power is thus circumscribed, nothing the witches say or do conveys the presence of awesome and unexplained malevolence.
in the way that Lear's storm does. Even the process of dramatic representation itself may diminish their power: embodied, perhaps, they lack full power to terrify: “Present fears”—even of witches—“are less than horrible imaginings” (1.3.137-38). They tend thus to become as much containers for as expressions of nightmare; to a certain extent, they help to exorcise the terror of female malevolence by localizing it.

The witches may of course have lost some of their power to terrify through the general decline in witchcraft belief. Nonetheless, even when that belief was in full force, these witches would have been less frightening than their Continental sisters, their crimes less sensational. For despite their numinous and infinitely suggestive indefinability, insofar as they are witches, they are distinctly English witches; and most commentators on English witchcraft note how tame an affair it was in comparison with witchcraft belief on the Continent. The most sensational staples of Continental belief from the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) on—the ritual murder and eating of infants, the attacks specifically on the male genitals, the perverse sexual relationship with demons—are missing or greatly muted in English witchcraft belief, replaced largely by a simpler concern with retaliatory wrongdoing of exactly the order Shakespeare points to when one of his witches announces her retaliation for the sailor’s wife's refusal to share her chestnuts. We may hear an echo of some of the Continental beliefs in the hint of their quasi-sexual attack on the sailor with the uncooperative wife (the witches promise to “do and do and do,” leaving him drained “dry as hay”) and in the infanticidal contents of the cauldron, especially the “finger of birth-strangled babe” and the blood of the sow “that hath eaten / Her nine farrow.” The cannibalism that is a staple of Continental belief may be implicit in the contents of that grim cauldron; and the various eyes, toes, tongues, legs, teeth, livers, and noses (indiscriminately human and animal) may evoke primitive fears of dismemberment close to the center of witchcraft belief. But these terrors remain largely implicit. For Shakespeare's witches are both smaller and greater than their Continental sisters: on the one hand, more the representation of English homebodies with relatively small concerns; on the other, more the incarnation of literary or mythic fates or sybils, given the power not only to predict but to enforce the future. But the staples of Continental witchcraft belief are not altogether missing from the play: for the most part, they are transferred away from the witches and recur as the psychological issues evoked by Lady Macbeth in her relation to Macbeth. She becomes the inheritor of the realm of primitive relational and bodily disturbance: of infantile vulnerability to maternal power, of dismemberment and its developmentally later equivalent, castration. Lady Macbeth brings the witches’ power home: they get the cosmic apparatus, she gets the psychic force. That Lady Macbeth is the more frightening figure—and was so, I suspect, even before belief in witchcraft had declined—suggests the firmly domestic and psychological basis of Shakespeare's imagination.

The fears of female coercion, female definition of the male, that are initially located cosmically in the witches thus find their ultimate locus in the figure of Lady Macbeth, whose attack on Macbeth's virility is the source of her strength over him and who acquires that strength, I shall argue, partly because she can make him imagine himself as an infant vulnerable to her. In the figure of Lady Macbeth, that is, Shakespeare rephrases the power of the witches as the wife/mother's power to poison human relatedness at its source; in her, their power of cosmic coercion is rewritten as the power of the mother to misshape or destroy the child. The attack on infants and on the genitals characteristic of Continental witchcraft belief is thus in her returned to its psychological source: in the play these beliefs are localized not in the witches but in the great central scene in which Lady Macbeth persuades Macbeth to the murder of Duncan. In this scene, Lady Macbeth notoriously makes the murder of Duncan the test of Macbeth's virility; if he cannot perform the murder, he is in effect reduced to the helplessness of an infant subject to her rage. She begins by attacking his manhood, making her love for him contingent on the murder that she identifies as equivalent to his male potency: “From this time / Such I account thy love” (1.7.38-39); “When you durst do it, then you were a man” (1.7.49). Insofar as his drunk hope is now “green and pale” (1.7.37), he is identified as emasculated, exhibiting the symptoms not only of hangover, but also of the green-sickness, the typical disease of timid young virgin women. Lady Macbeth’s argument is, in effect, that any signs of the “milk of human kindness” (1.5.17) mark him as more womanly than she; she proceeds to enforce his masculinity by demonstrating her willingness to dry up that milk in herself, specifically by destroying her nursing infant in fantasy: “I would, while it was smiling in my
face, / Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dash’d the brains out” (1.7.56-58). That this image has no place in the plot, where the Macbeths are strikingly childless, gives some indication of the inner necessity through which it appears. For Lady Macbeth expresses here not only the hardness she imagines to be male, not only her willingness to unmake the most essential maternal relationship; she expresses also a deep fantasy of Macbeth’s utter vulnerability to her. As she progresses from questioning Macbeth’s masculinity to imagining herself dashing out the brains of her infant son, she articulates a fantasy in which to be less than a man is to become interchangeably a woman or a baby, terribly subject to the wife/mother’s destructive rage.

By evoking this vulnerability, Lady Macbeth acquires a power over Macbeth more absolute than any the witches can achieve. The play’s central fantasy of escape from woman seems to me to unfold from this moment; we can see its beginnings in Macbeth’s response to Lady Macbeth’s evocation of absolute maternal power. Macbeth first responds by questioning the possibility of failure (“If we should fail?” [1.7.59]). Lady Macbeth counters this fear by inviting Macbeth to share in her fantasy of omnipotent malevolence: “What cannot you and I perform upon / Th’unguarded Duncan?” (1.7.70-71). The satiated and sleeping Duncan takes on the vulnerability that Lady Macbeth has just invoked in the image of the feeding, trusting infant; Macbeth releases himself from the image of this vulnerability by sharing in the murder of this innocent. In his elation at this transfer of vulnerability from himself to Duncan, Macbeth imagines Lady Macbeth the mother to infants sharing her hardness, born in effect without vulnerability; in effect, he imagines her as male and then reconstitutes himself as the invulnerable male child of such a mother:

Bring forth men-children only!

For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males.

[1.7.73-75]

Through the double pun on mettle/metal and male/mail, Lady Macbeth herself becomes virtually male, composed of the hard metal of which the armored male is made. Her children would necessarily be men, composed of her male mettle, armored by her mettle, lacking the female inheritance from the mother that would make them vulnerable. The man-child thus brought forth would be no trusting infant; the very phrase men-children suggests the presence of the adult man even at birth, hence the undoing of childish vulnerability. The mobility of the imagery—from male infant with his brains dashed out to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth triumphing over the sleeping, trusting Duncan, to the all-male invulnerable man-child, suggests the logic of the fantasy: only the child of an all-male mother is safe. We see here the creation of a defensive fantasy of exemption from the woman’s part: as infantile vulnerability is shifted to Duncan, Macbeth creates in himself the image of Lady Macbeth’s hardened all-male man-child; in committing the murder, he thus becomes like Richard III, using the bloody axe to free himself in fantasy from the dominion of women, even while apparently carrying out their will.

Macbeth’s temporary solution to the infantile vulnerability and maternal malevolence revealed by Lady Macbeth is to imagine Lady Macbeth the all-male mother of invulnerable infants. The final solution, both for Macbeth and for the play itself, though in differing ways, is an even more radical excision of the female: it is to imagine a birth entirely exempt from women, to imagine in effect an all-male family, composed of nothing but males, in which the father is fully restored to power. Overtly, of course, the play denies the possibility of this fantasy: Macduff carries the power of the man not born of woman only through the equivocation of the fiends, their obstetrical joke that quibbles with the meaning of born and thus confirms circuitously that all men come from women after all. Even Macbeth, in whom, I think, the fantasy is centrally invested, knows its impossibility: his false security depends exactly on his commonsense assumption that everyone is born of woman. Nonetheless, I shall argue, the play curiously enacts the fantasy that it seems to deny: punishing Macbeth for his participation in a fantasy of escape from the maternal matrix, it nonetheless allows the audience the partial satisfaction of a dramatic equivalent to it. The dual process of repudiation and enactment
of the fantasy seems to me to shape the ending of Macbeth decisively; I will attempt to trace this process in the rest of this essay.

The witches' prophecy has the immediate force of psychic relevance for Macbeth partly because of the fantasy constructions central to 1.7:

Be bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn
The power of man, for none of woman born
Shall harm Macbeth.

[4.1.79-81]

The witches here invite Macbeth to make himself into the bloody and invulnerable man-child he has created as a defense against maternal malevolence in 1.7: the man-child ambivalently recalled by the accompanying apparition of the Bloody Child. For the apparition alludes at once to the bloody vulnerability of the infant destroyed by Lady Macbeth and to the bloodthirsty masculinity that seems to promise escape from this vulnerability, the bloodiness the witches urge Macbeth to take on. The doubleness of the image epitomizes exactly the doubleness of the prophecy itself: the prophecy constructs Macbeth's invulnerability in effect from the vulnerability of all other men, a vulnerability dependent on their having been born of woman. Macbeth does not question this prophecy, even after the experience of Birnam Wood should have taught him better, partly because it so perfectly meets his needs: in encouraging him to “laugh to scorn / The power of men,” the prophecy seems to grant him exemption from the condition of all men, who bring with them the liabilities inherent in their birth. As Macbeth carries the prophecy as a shield onto the battlefield, his confidence in his own invulnerability increasingly reveals his sense of his own exemption from the universal human condition. Repeated seven times, the phrase born to woman with its variants begins to carry for Macbeth the meaning “vulnerable,” as though vulnerability itself is the taint deriving from woman; his own invulnerability comes therefore to stand as evidence for his exemption from that taint. This is the subterranean logic of Macbeth's words to Young Siward immediately after Macbeth has killed him:

But swords I smile at, weapons laugh to scorn,
Brandish'd by man that's of a woman born.

[5.7.11-13]

Young Siward's death becomes in effect proof that he was born of woman; in the logic of Macbeth's psyche, Macbeth's invulnerability is the proof that he was not. The but records this fantasied distinction: it constructs the sentence “You, born of woman, are vulnerable; but I, not born of woman, am not.”

Insofar as this is the fantasy embodied in Macbeth at the play's end, it is punished by the equivocation of the fiends: the revelation that Macduff derives from woman, though by unusual means, musters against Macbeth all the values of ordinary family and community that Macduff carries with him. Macbeth, “cow’d” by the revelation (5.8.18), is forced to take on the taint of vulnerability; the fantasy of escape from the maternal matrix seems to die with him. But although this fantasy is punished in Macbeth, it does not quite die with him; it continues to have a curious life of its own in the play, apart from its embodiment in him. Even from the beginning of the play, the fantasy has not been Macbeth's alone: as the play's most striking bloody man, he is in the beginning the bearer of this fantasy for the all-male community that depends on his bloody prowess. The opening scenes strikingly construct male and female as realms apart; and the initial descriptions of Macbeth's battles construe his prowess as a consequence of his exemption from the taint of woman.

In the description of his battle with Macdonwald, what looks initially like a battle between loyal and disloyal sons to establish primacy in the father's eyes is oddly transposed into a battle of male against female:
As two spent swimmers, that do cling together
And choke their art. The merciless Macdonald
(Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
The multiplying villainies of nature
Do swarm upon him) from the western isles
Of Kernes and Gallowglasses is supplied;
And Fortune, on his damned quarrel smiling,
Show'd like a rebel's whore: but all's too weak;
For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
Which smok'd with bloody execution,
Like Valour's minion, carv'd out his passage,
Till he fac'd the slave;
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops,
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

[1.2.7-23]

The two initially indistinguishable figures metaphorized as the swimmers eventually sort themselves out into victor and victim, but only by first sorting themselves out into male and female, as though Macbeth can be distinguished from Macdonald only by making Macdonald functionally female. The “merciless Macdonald” is initially firmly identified; but by the time Macbeth appears, Macdonald has temporarily disappeared, replaced by the female figure of Fortune, against whom Macbeth seems to fight (“brave Macbeth, … Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel”). The metaphorical substitution of Fortune for Macdonald transforms the battle into a contest between male and female; it makes Macbeth's deserving of his name contingent on his victory over the female. We are prepared for this transformation by Macdonald's sexual alliance with the tainting female, the whore Fortune; Macbeth's identification as valor's minion redefines the battle as a contest between the half-female couple Fortune/Macdonald and the all-male couple Valor/Macbeth. Metaphorically, Macdonald and Macbeth take on the qualities of the unreliable female and the heroic male; Macbeth's battle against Fortune turns out to be his battle against Macdonald because the two are functionally the same. Macdonald, tainted by the female, becomes an easy mark for Macbeth, who demonstrates his own untainted manhood by unseaming Macdonald from the nave to the chops. Through its allusions both to castration and to Caesarian section, this unseaming furthermore remakes Macdonald's body as female, revealing what his alliance with Fortune has suggested all along.

In effect, then, the battle that supports the father's kingdom plays out the creation of a conquering all-male erotics that marks its conquest by its triumph over a feminized body, simultaneously that of Fortune and Macdonald. Hence, in the double action of the passage, the victorious unseaming happens twice: first on the body of Fortune and then on the body of Macdonald. The lines descriptive of Macbeth's approach to Macdonald—“brave Macbeth … Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel … carved out his passage”—make that approach contingent on Macbeth's first carving his passage through a female body, hewing his way out. The language here perfectly anticipates Macduff's birth by Caesarian section, revealed at the end of the play: if Macduff is ripped untimely from his mother's womb, Macbeth here manages in fantasy his own Caesarian section, carving his passage out from the unreliable female to achieve heroic male action, in effect carving up the female to arrive at the male. Only after this rite of passage can Macbeth meet Macdonald: the act of aggression toward the female body, the fantasy of self-birth, marks his passage to the contest that will be definitive of his maleness partly insofar as it is definitive of Macdonald's tainted femaleness. For the all-male community surrounding Duncan, then, Macbeth's victory is allied with his triumph over femaleness; for them, he becomes invulnerable, “lapp'd in proof” (1.2.55) like one of Lady Macbeth's armored men-children. Even before his entry into the play, that is, Macbeth is the bearer of the shared fantasy that secure male community depends on the prowess of the man in effect not born of woman, the man who can carve his own passage out, the man whose very maleness is the mark of his exemption from
female power.\(^{38}\)

Ostensibly, the play rejects the version of manhood implicit in the shared fantasy of the beginning. Macbeth himself is well aware that his capitulation to Lady Macbeth's definition of manhood entails his abandonment of his own more inclusive definition of what becomes a man (1.7.46); and Macduff's response to the news of his family's destruction insists that humane feeling is central to the definition of manhood (4.3.221). Moreover, the revelation that even Macduff had a mother sets a limiting condition on the fantasy of a bloody masculine escape from the female and hence on the kind of manhood defined by that escape. Nonetheless, even at the end, the play enables one version of the fantasy that heroic manhood is exemption from the female even while it punishes that fantasy in Macbeth. The key figure in whom this double movement is vested in the end of the play is Macduff; the unresolved contradictions that surround him are, I think, marks of ambivalence toward the fantasy itself. In insisting that mourning for his family is his right as a man, he presents family feeling as central to the definition of manhood; and yet he conspicuously leaves his family vulnerable to destruction when he goes off to offer his services to Malcolm. The play moreover insists on reminding us that he has inexplicably abandoned his family: both Lady Macduff and Malcolm question the necessity of this abandonment (4.2.6-14; 4.3.26-28); and the play never allows Macduff to explain himself. This unexplained abandonment severely qualifies Macduff's force as the play's central exemplar of a healthy manhood that can include the possibility of relationship to women: the play seems to vest diseased familial relations in Macbeth and the possibility of healthy ones in Macduff; and yet we discover dramatically that Macduff has a family only when we hear that he has abandoned it. Dramatically and psychologically, he takes on full masculine power only as he loses his family and becomes energized by the loss, converting his grief into the more “manly” tune of vengeance (4.3.235); the loss of his family here enables his accession to full masculine action even while his response to that loss insists on a more humane definition of manhood.\(^{39}\) The play here pulls in two directions. It reiterates this doubleness by vesting in Macduff its final fantasy of exemption from woman. The ambivalence that shapes the portrayal of Macduff is evident even as he reveals to Macbeth that he “was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp’d” (5.8.15-16): the emphasis on untimeliness and the violence of the image suggest that he has been prematurely deprived of a nurturing maternal presence; but the prophecy construes just this deprivation as the source of Macduff's strength.\(^{40}\) The prophecy itself both denies and affirms the fantasy of exemption from women: in affirming that Macduff has indeed had a mother, it denies the fantasy of male self-generation; but in attributing his power to his having been untimely ripped from that mother, it sustains the sense that violent separation from the mother is the mark of the successful male. The final battle between Macbeth and Macduff thus replays the initial battle between Macbeth and Macdonwald. But Macduff has now taken the place of Macbeth: he carries with him the male power given him by the Caesarian solution, and Macbeth is retrospectively revealed as Macdonwald, the woman's man.

The doubleness of the prophecy is less the equivocation of the fiends than Shakespeare's own equivocation about the figure of Macduff and about the fantasy vested in him in the end. For Macduff carries with him simultaneously all the values of family and the claim that masculine power derives from the unnatural abrogation of family, including escape from the conditions of one's birth. Moreover, the ambivalence that shapes the figure of Macduff similarly shapes the dramatic structure of the play itself. Ostensibly concerned to restore natural order at the end,\(^{41}\) the play bases that order upon the radical exclusion of the female. Initially construed as all-powerful, the women virtually disappear at the end, Lady Macbeth becoming so diminished a character that we scarcely trouble to ask ourselves whether the report of her suicide is accurate or not, the witches literally gone from the stage and so diminished in psychic power that Macbeth never mentions them and blames his defeat only on the equivocation of their male masters, the fiends; even Lady Macduff exists only to disappear. The bogus fulfillment of the Birnam Wood prophecy suggests the extent to which the natural order of the end depends on the exclusion of the female. Critics sometimes see in the march of Malcolm's soldiers bearing their green branches an allusion to the Maying festivals in which participants returned from the woods bearing branches, or to the ritual scourging of a hibernal figure by the forces of the oncoming spring.\(^{42}\) The allusion seems to me clearly present; but it serves, I think, to mark precisely what the moving of Birnam Wood is not. Malcolm's use of Birnam Wood is a military maneuver. His drily worded
command (5.4.4-7) leaves little room for suggestions of natural fertility or for the deep sense of the generative world rising up to expel its winter king; nor does the play later enable these associations except in a scattered and partly ironic way. These trees have little resemblance to those in the Forest of Arden; their branches, like those carried by the apparition of the “child crowned, with a tree in his hand” (4.1.86), are little more than the emblems of a strictly patriarchal family tree. This family tree, like the march of Birnam Wood itself, is relentlessly male: Duncan and sons, Banquo and son, Siward and son. There are no daughters and scarcely any mention of mothers in these family trees. We are brought as close as possible here to the fantasy of family without women. In that sense, Birnam Wood is the perfect emblem of the nature that triumphs at the end of the play: nature without generative possibility, nature without women. Malcolm tells his men to carry the branches to obscure themselves, and that is exactly their function: insofar as they seem to allude to the rising of the natural order against Macbeth, they obscure the operations of male power, disguising them as a natural force; and they simultaneously obscure the extent to which natural order itself is here reconceived as purely male.

If we can see the fantasy of escape from the female in the play's fulfillment of the witches' prophecies—in Macduff's birth by Caesarian section and in Malcolm's appropriation of Birnam Wood—we can see it also in the play's psychological geography. The shift from Scotland to England is strikingly the shift from the mother's to the father's terrain. Scotland “cannot / Be call'd our mother, but our grave” (4.3.165-66), in Rosse's words to Macduff: it is the realm of Lady Macbeth and the witches, the realm in which the mother is the grave, the realm appropriately ruled by their bad son Macbeth. The escape to England is an escape from their power into the realm of the good father-king and his surrogate son Malcolm, “unknown to woman” (4.3.126). The magical power of this father to cure clearly balances the magical power of the witches to harm, as Malcolm (the father's son) balances Macbeth (the mother's son). That Macduff can cross from one realm into the other only by abandoning his family suggests the rigidity of the psychic geography separating England from Scotland. At the end of the play, Malcolm returns to Scotland mantled in the power England gives him, in effect bringing the power of the fathers with him: bearer of his father's line, unknown to woman, supported by his agent Macduff (empowered by his own special immunity from birth), Malcolm embodies utter separation from women and as such triumphs easily over Macbeth, the mother's son.

The play that begins by unleashing the terrible threat of destructive maternal power and demonstrates the helplessness of its central male figure before that power thus ends by consolidating male power, in effect solving the problem of masculinity by eliminating the female. In the psychological fantasies that I am tracing, the play portrays the failure of the androgynous parent to protect his son, that son's consequent fall into the dominion of the bad mothers, and the final victory of a masculine order in which mothers no longer threaten because they no longer exist. In that sense, Macbeth is a recuperative consolidation of male power, a consolidation in the face of the threat unleashed in Hamlet and especially in King Lear and never fully contained in those plays. In Macbeth, maternal power is given its most virulent sway and then abolished; at the end of the play we are in a purely male realm. We will not be in so absolute a male realm again until we are in Prospero's island-kingdom, similarly based firmly on the exiling of the witch Sycorax.

Notes

2. I have written elsewhere about Coriolanus' doomed attempts to create a self that is independent of his mother's will; see my “Anger's My Meat': Feeding, Dependency, and Aggression in Coriolanus,” in Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 129-49. Others have noted the extent to which both Macbeth and Coriolanus deal with the construction of a rigid male identity felt as a defense against overwhelming maternal power; see particularly Coppélia Kahn, Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), 151-92,
whose chapter title—“The Milking Babe and the Bloody Man in Coriolanus and Macbeth”—indicates the similarity of our concerns. Linda Bamber argues, however, that the absence of a feminine Other in Macbeth and Coriolanus prevents the development of manliness in the heroes, since true manliness “involves a detachment from the feminine” (Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982], 20, 91-107).

3. “Gowries Conspiracie: A Discoverie of the unnaturall and vyle Conspiracie, attempted against the Kings Maisties Person at Sanct-Iohnstoun, upon Twysday the Fifth of August, 1600,” in A Selection from the Hadieian Miscellany (London: C. & G. Kearsley, 1793), 196.

4. Stanley J. Kozikowski argues strenuously that Shakespeare knew either the pamphlet cited above (“Gowries Conspiracie,” printed in Scotland and London in 1600) or the abortive play on the conspiracy, apparently performed twice by the King’s Men and then canceled in 1604 (“The Gowrie Conspiracy against James VI: A New Source for Shakespeare’s Macbeth,” Shakespeare Studies 13 [1980]: 197-211). Although I do not find his arguments entirely persuasive, it seems likely that Shakespeare knew at least the central facts of the conspiracy, given both James’s annual celebration of his escape from it and the apparent involvement of the King’s Men in a play on the subject. See also Steven Mullaney’s suggestive use of the Gowrie material as an analogue for Macbeth in its link between treason and magical riddle (“Lying Like Truth: Riddle, Representation and Treason in Renaissance England,” ELH 47 [1980]: 32, 38).

5. After the failure of the conspiracy, James searched the dead earl’s pockets, finding nothing in them “but a little close parchment bag, full of magicall characters, and words of enchantment, wherin, it seemed, that he had put his confidence, thinking him selfe never safe without them, and therfore ever carried them about with him; beeing also observed, that, while they were uppon him, his wound whereof he died, bled not, but, incontinent after the taking of them away, the blood gushed out in great aboundance, to the great admiration of al the beholders” (“Gowries Conspiracie,” 196). The magical stopping up of the blood and the sudden return of its natural flow seem to me potent images for the progress of Macbeth as he is first seduced and then abandoned by the witches’ prophecies; that Gowrie’s necromancer, like the witches, seemed to dabble in alternate modes of generation increases the suggestiveness of this association for Macbeth.


7. Impale in the sense of “to enclose with pales, stakes or posts; to surround with a pallisade” (OED’s first meaning) is of course the dominant usage contemporary with Macbeth. But the word was in the process of change. OED’s meaning 4, “to thrust a pointed stake through the body of, as a form of torture or capital punishment,” although cited first in 1613, clearly seems to stand behind the imagistic transformation here. The shift in meaning perfectly catches Richard’s psychological process, in which any protective enclosure is ambivalently desired and threatens to turn into a torturing impalement.

8. Robert N. Watson notes the imagery of Caesarian birth here and in Macbeth (Shakespeare and the Hazards of Ambition [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984], esp. 19-20, 99-105); the metaphors of Caesarian section and Oedipal rape are central to his understanding of ambitious self-creation insofar as both imagine a usurpation of the defining parental acts of generation (see, for example, pp. 3-5). Though it is frequently very suggestive, Watson’s account tends too easily to blur the distinction between matricide and patricide: in fantasies of rebirth, the hero may symbolically replace the father to re-create himself, but he does so by means of an attack specifically on the maternal body. In Shakespeare’s images of Caesarian birth, the father tends to be conspicuously absent; indeed, I shall argue, precisely his absence—not his defining presence—creates the fear of the
engulfing maternal body to which the fantasy of Caesarian section is a response. This body tends to be missing in Watson's account, as it is missing in his discussion of Richard's Caesarian fantasy here.


11. Many commentators note that Shakespeare's Duncan is less ineffectual than Holingshed's; others note the continuing signs of his weakness. See especially Harry Berger's brilliant account of the structural effect of Duncan's weakness in defining his (and Macbeth's) society (“The Early Scenes of Macbeth: Preface to a New Interpretation,” ELH 47 [1980]: 26-28). Murray M. Schwartz and Richard Wheeler note specifically the extent to which the male claim to androgynous possession of nurturant power reflects a fear of maternal power outside male control (Schwartz, “Shakespeare through Contemporary Psychoanalysis,” in Representing Shakespeare, 29. Wheeler, Shakespeare's Development, 146. My discussion of Duncan's androgyny is partly a consequence of my having heard Peter Erickson's rich account of the Duke's taking on of nurturant function in As You Like It at MLA in 1979; this account is now part of his Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985); see esp. pp. 27-37.

12. Many commentators note that Shakespeare's Duncan is less ineffectual than Holingshed's; others note the continuing signs of his weakness. See especially Harry Berger's brilliant account of the structural effect of Duncan's weakness in defining his (and Macbeth's) society (“The Early Scenes,” 1-31).

13. Many note the appropriateness of Macbeth's conflation of himself with Tarquin, given the play's alliance of sexuality and murder. See, for example, Ian Robinson, “The Witches and Macbeth,” Critical Review 11 (1968): 104; Biggins, “Sexuality, Witchcraft, and Violence,” 269; and Watson,
Arthur Kirsch works extensively with the analogy, seeing the Tarquin of *The Rape of Lucrece* as a model for Macbeth's ambitious desire ("Macbeth's Suicide," *ELH* 51 [1984]: 269-96). Commentators on the analogy do not in general note that it transforms Macbeth's kingly victim into a woman; Norman Rabkin is the exception (*Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning* [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981], 107).

Wheeler sees the simultaneously castrated and castrating Gorgon-like body of Duncan as the emblem of the world Macbeth brings into being (*Shakespeare's Development*, 145); I see it as the emblem of a potentially castrating femaleness that Macbeth's act of violence reveals but does not create.


Many commentators, following Freud, find the murder of Duncan "little else than parricide" ("Those Wrecked by Success," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey [London, Hogarth Press, 1957], 14: 321); see, for example, Rabkin, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning*, 106-9, Kirsch, "Macbeth's Suicide," 276-80, 286, and Watson, *Shakespeare and the Hazards of Ambition*, esp. 85-88, 98-99 (the last two are particularly interesting in understanding parricide as an ambitious attempt to redefine the self as omnipotently free from limits). In standard Oedipal readings of the play, the mother is less the object of desire than "the 'demon-woman,' who creates the abyss between father and son" by inciting the son to parricide (Ludwig Jekels, "The Riddle of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*," in *The Design Within*, 240). See also, for example, L. Veszy-Wagner, "Macbeth: ‘Fair Is Foul and Foul Is Fair,’” *American Imago* 25 (1968): 242-57; Norman N. Holland, *Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare* (New York: Octagon Books, 1979), 229; and Patrick Colm Hogan's very suggestive account of the Oedipal narrative structure, "*Macbeth: Authority and Progenitorship,*" *American Imago* 40 (1983): 385-95. My reading differs from these Oedipal readings mainly in suggesting that the play's mothers acquire their power because the father's protective masculine authority is already significantly absent; in my reading, female power over Macbeth becomes the sign (rather than the cause) of that absence.

For those recent commentators who follow Barron in seeing pre-Oedipal rather than Oedipal issues as central to the play, the images of disrupted nurturance define the primary area of disturbance; see, for example, Barron, "The Babe That Milks," 255; Schwartz, "Shakespeare through Psychoanalysis," 29; Berger, "The Early Scenes," 27-28; Joan M. Byles, "Macbeth: Imagery of Destruction," *American Imago* 39 (1982): 149-64; Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development*, 147-48; and Kirsch, "Macbeth's Suicide," 291-92. Although Madelon Gohlke (now Sprengnether) does not specifically discuss the rupture of maternal nurturance in *Macbeth*, my understanding of the play is very much indebted to her classic essay, "'I wooed thee with my sword': Shakespeare's Tragic Paradigms," in which she establishes the extent to which masculinity in Shakespeare's heroes entails a defensive denial of the female (in *Representing Shakespeare*: 170-87); in an unfortunately unpublished essay, she discusses the traumatic failure of maternal protection imaged by Lady Macbeth here. In his brilliant essay "Phantasmagoric Macbeth" (forthcoming in *ELR*), David Willbern locates in Lady Macbeth's image the psychological point of origin for the failure of potential space that Macbeth enacts. Erickson, noting that patriarchal bounty in *Macbeth* has gone awry, suggestively locates the dependence of that bounty on the maternal nurturance that is here disturbed (*Patriarchal Structures*, 116-21). Several critics see in Macbeth's susceptibility to female influence evidence of his failure to differentiate from a maternal figure, a failure psychologically the consequence of the abrupt and bloody weaning imaged by Lady Macbeth; see, for example, Susan Bachmann, "‘Daggers in Men's Smiles’—The ‘Truest Issue’ in *Macbeth,*" *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 5 (1978): 97-104; and particularly the full and very suggestive accounts of Barron, "The Babe That Milks," 263-68, and Kahn, *Man's Estate,*
172-78. In the readings of all these critics, as in mine, Lady Macbeth and the witches variously embody the destructive maternal force that overwhelms Macbeth and in relation to whom he is imagined as an infant. Rosenberg notes intriguingly that *Macbeth* has twice been performed with a mother and son in the chief roles (*Masks of Macbeth*, 196).

18. Despite some overliteral interpretation, Alice Fox and particularly Jenijoy La Belle usefully demonstrate the specifically gynecological references of “passage” and “visitings of nature,” using contemporary gynecological treatises. (See Fox, “Obstetrics and Gynecology in *Macbeth*,” *Shakespeare Studies* 12 [1979]: 129; and La Belle, “‘A Strange Infirmity’: Lady Macbeth's Amenorrhea,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31 [1980]: 382, for the identification of *visitings of nature* as a term for menstruation; see La Belle, 383, for the identification of *passage* as a term for the neck of the womb. See also Barron, who associates Lady Macbeth's language here with contraception (“The Babe That Milks,” 267).)


20. Insofar as syphilis was known to be transmitted through the nursing process, there was some reason to worry; see, for example, William Clowes's frightening account, “A brief and necessary Treatise touching the cure of the disease called Morbus Gallicus” (London, 1585, 1596), 151. But Leontes' words to Hermione as he removes Mamillius from her (“I am glad you did not nurse him. / Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you / Have too much blood in him” [*The Winter's Tale*, 2.1.56-58]) suggest that the worry was not fundamentally about epidemiology. Worry that the nurse's milk determined morals was, of course, common; see, for example, Thomas Phaire, *The Boke of Chyldren* (1545; reprint, Edinburgh: E. & S. Livingstone, 1955), 18. The topic was of interest to King James, who claimed to have sucked his Protestantism from his nurse's milk; his drunkenness was also attributed to her. See Henry N. Paul, *The Royal Play of “Macbeth”* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1950), 387-88. For the identification of colostrum with witch's milk, see Samuel X. Radbill, “Pediatrics,” in *Medicine in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Allen G. Debus (Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1974), 249. The fear of maternal functioning itself, not simply of its perversions, is central to most readings of the play in pre-Oedipal terms; see the critics cited in note 17 above.

21. Many commentators on English witchcraft note the unusual prominence given to the presence of the witch's mark and the nursing of familiars; see, for example, Barbara Rosen's introduction to the collection of witchcraft documents she edited (*Witchcraft* [London: Edward Arnold, 1969], 29-30). She cites contemporary documents on the nursing of familiars, for example, pp. 187-88, 315; the testimony of Joan Prentice, one of the convicted witches of Chelmsford in 1589, is particularly suggestive: “at what time soever she would have her ferret do anything for her, she used the words ‘Bid, Bid, Bid, come Bid, come Bid, come suck, come suck, come suck’” (p. 188). Katharine Mary Briggs quotes a contemporary (1613) story about the finding of a witch's teat (*Pale Hecate's Team* [New York: Arno Press, 1977], 250); see also Wallace Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718* (Washington: American Historical Association, 1911), 36; and George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1956), 179. Though he does not refer to the suckling of familiars, King James believed in the significance of the witch's mark, at least when he wrote the *Daemonologie* (see p. 33). M. C. Bradbrook notes that Lady Macbeth's invitation to the spirits is “as much as any witch could do by way of self-dedication” (“The Sources of *Macbeth*,” *Shakespeare Survey* 4 [1951]: 43).

23. Wilbur Sanders notes the extent to which “terror is mediated through absurdity” in the witches (The Dramatist and the Received Idea [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968], 277); see also Berger's fine account of the scapegoating reduction of the witches to a comic and grotesque triviality (“Text Against Performance,” 67-68). Harold C. Goddard (The Meaning of Shakespeare [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951], 512-13), Robinson (“The Witches and Macbeth,” 100-103), and Stallybrass, ("Macbeth and Witchcraft," 199) note the witches' change from potent and mysterious to more diminished figures in act 4.

24. After years of trying fruitlessly to pin down a precise identity for the witches, critics are increasingly finding their dramatic power precisely in their indefinability. The most powerful statements of this relatively new critical topos are those by Sanders (The Dramatist and the Received Idea, 277-79), Robert H. West (Shakespeare and the Outer Mystery [Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968], 78-79), and Stephen Booth ("King Lear," “Macbeth,” Indefinition, and Tragedy [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983], 101-3).

25. For their “Englishness”, see Stallybrass, “Macbeth and Witchcraft,” 195. Alan Macfarlane's important study of English witchcraft, Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), frequently notes the absence of the Continental staples: if the witches of Essex are typical, English witches do not fly, do not hold Sabbaths, do not commit sexual perversions or attack male potency, do not kill babies (see pp. 6, 160, 180, for example).

26. Macfarlane finds the failure of neighborliness reflected in the retaliatory acts of the witch the key to the social function of witchcraft in England; see ibid., 168-76 for accounts of the failures of neighborliness—very similar to the refusal to share chestnuts—that provoked the witch to act. James Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, Malleus Maleficarum, trans. Montague Summers (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1970), is the locus classicus for Continental witchcraft beliefs: for the murder and eating of infants, see pp. 21, 66, 99, 100-101; for attacks on the genitals, see pp. 47, 55-60, 117-19; for sexual relations with demons, see pp. 21, 112-14. Or see Scot's convenient summary of these beliefs (Discoverie, 31).

27. The relationship between cosmology and domestic psychology is similar in King Lear; even as Shakespeare casts doubt on the authenticity of demonic possession by his use of Harsnett's Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures, Edgar/Poor Tom's identification of his father as “the foul Flibbertigibbet” (3.4.108) manifests the psychic reality and source of his demons. Characteristically in Shakespeare, the site of blessing and of cursedness is the family, their processes psychological.

28. Although his was a common form for the as yet unfamiliar possessive its, Lady Macbeth's move from “while it was smiling” to “his boneless gums” nonetheless seems to register the metamorphosis of an ungendered to a gendered infant exactly at the moment of vulnerability, making her attack specifically on a male child. That she uses the ungendered the a moment later (“the brains out”) suggests one alternative open to Shakespeare had he wished to avoid the implication that the fantasied infant was male; Antony's crocodile, who “moves with it own organs” (Antony and Cleopatra, 2.7.42), suggests another. (OED notes that, although its occurs in the Folio, it does not occur in any work of Shakespeare published while he was alive; it also notes the various strategies by which authors attempted to avoid the inappropriate use of his.)

29. Lady Macbeth maintains her control over Macbeth through 3.4 by manipulating these categories: see 2.2.53-54 (“'tis the eye of childhood / That fears a painted devil”) and 3.4.57-65 (“Are you a man? … these flaws and starts … would well become / A woman's story”). In his response to Banquo's ghost, Macbeth invokes the same categories and suggests their interchangeability: he dares what man dares (3.4.98); if he feared Banquo alive, he could rightly be called “the baby of a girl” (l. 105).
30. In “Phantasmagoric Macbeth,” David Willbern notes the extent to which the regicide is reimagined as a “symbolic infanticide” so that the image of Duncan fuses with the image of Lady Macbeth's child murdered in fantasy. Macbeth's earlier association of Duncan's power with the power of the “naked new-born babe, / Striding the blast” (1.7.21-22) prepares for this fusion. Despite their symbolic power, the literal babies of this play and those adults who sleep and trust like infants are hideously vulnerable.

31. See Kahn, Man's Estate, 173, for a very similar account of this passage.

32. Shakespeare's only other use of man-child is in a strikingly similar context: Volumnia, reporting her pleasure in Coriolanus' martial success, tells Virgilia, “I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man” (Coriolanus, 1.3.15-17).

33. De Quincey seems to have understood this process: “The murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires. They are transfigured: Lady Macbeth is ‘unsexed’; Macbeth has forgot that he was born of woman” (“On the Knocking at the Gate in ‘Macbeth,’” in Shakespeare Criticism: A Selection, 1623-1840, ed. D. Nichol Smith [London: Oxford University Press, 1946], 335). Critics who consider gender relations central to this play generally note the importance of the witches' prophecy for the figure of Macduff; they do not usually note its application to Macbeth. But see Kahn's suggestion that the prophecy sets Macbeth “apart from women as well as from men” (Man's Estate, 187) and Gohlke's central perception that, “to be born of woman, as [Macbeth] reads the witches' prophecy, is to be mortal” (“I wooed thee,” 176).

34. See Kahn's rich understanding of the function of the term cow’d (Man's Estate, 191).

35. Many comment on this contamination; see, for example, Berger, “The Early Scenes of Macbeth,” 7-8; Hogan, “Macbeth,” 387; Rosenberg, The Masks of Macbeth, 45; Biggins, “Sexuality, Witches, and Violence,” 265.

36. Watson notes the suggestion of Caesarian section here, through not its aggression toward the female. Barron does not comment specifically on this passage but notes breaking and cutting imagery throughout and relates it to Macbeth's attempt to “cut his way out of the female environment which chokes and smothers him” (“The Babe That Milks,” 269). I am indebted to Willbern's “Phantasmagoric Macbeth” specifically for the Caesarian implications of the unseaming from nave to chops.

37. The reference to Macbeth as “Bellona's bridegroom” anticipates his interaction with Lady Macbeth in 1.7: only the murderous man-child is fit mate for either of these unsexed, quasi-male figures.

38. To the extent that ferocious maleness is the creation of the male community, not of Lady Macbeth or the witches, the women are scapegoats who exist partly to obscure the failures of male community. For fuller accounts of this process, see Veszy-Wagner, “Macbeth,” 244, Bamber, Comic Women, 19-20, and especially Berger, “Text Against Performance,” 68-75. But whether or not the women are scapegoats insofar as they are (falsely) held responsible for Macbeth's murderous maleness, fear of the female power they represent remains primary (not secondary and obscurantist) insofar as the male community and, to some extent, the play itself define maleness as violent differentiation from the female.

39. A great many critics, following Waith (“Manhood and Valor,” 266-67), find the play's embodiment of healthy masculinity in Macduff. They often register some uneasiness about his leaving his family, but they rarely allow this uneasiness to complicate their view of him as exemplary. But critics interested in the play's construction of masculinity as a defense against the fear of femaleness tend to see in Macduff's removal from family a replication of the central fear of women that is more fully played out in Macbeth. See, for example, Wheeler, Shakespeare's Development, 146; and Berger, “Text Against Performance,” 70. For these critics, Macduff's flight is of a piece with his status as the man not born of woman.

40. Critics interested in gender issues almost invariably comment on the centrality of Macduff's fulfillment of this prophecy, finding his strength here in his freedom from contamination by or regressive dependency on women: see, for example, Harding, “Women's Fantasy,” 250; Barron, “The Babe That Milks,” 272; Berger, “The Early Scenes,” 28; Bachmann, “Daggers,” 101; Kirsch,
“Macbeth's Suicide,” 293; Kahn, *Man's Estate*, 172-73; Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development*, 146; and Victor Calef, “Lady Macbeth and Infanticide or ‘How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth Murdered?’” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 17 (1969): 537. For Barron and Harding, Macduff's status as the bearer of this fantasy positively enhances his manhood; but for many of these critics, it qualifies his status as the exemplar of healthy manhood. Perhaps because ambivalence toward Macduff is built so deeply into the play, several very astute critics see the fantasy embedded in Macduff here and nonetheless continue to find in him an ideal manhood that includes the possibility of relatedness to the feminine. See, for example, Kahn, *Man's Estate*, 191; and Kirsch, “Macbeth's Suicide,” 294.

41. The triumph of the natural order has of course been a commonplace of criticism since the classic essay by G. Wilson Knight, “The Milk of Concord: An Essay on Life-Themes in *Macbeth,*” in his *Imperial Theme* (London: Methuen, 1965), esp. 140-53. The topos is so powerful that it can cause even critics interested in gender issues to praise the triumph of nature and natural sexuality at the end without noting the exclusion of the female; see, for example, Greene, “Macbeth,” 172. But Rosenberg, for example, notes the qualifying effect of this exclusion (*Masks of Macbeth*, 654).


43. When Malcolm refers to planting (5.9.31) at the play's end, for example, his comment serves partly to reinforce our sense of his distance from his father's generative power.

44. Paul attributes Shakespeare's use of the imagery of the family tree here to his familiarity with the cut of the Banquo tree in Leslie's *De Origine, Moribus, et Rebus Gestis Scotorum* (Royal Play, 175). But the image is too familiar to call for such explanation; see, for example, the tree described in *Richard II* (1.2.12-21).

45. As Wheeler notes, the description of Malcolm's saintly mother makes him “symbolically the child of something approximating virgin birth” (*Shakespeare's Development*, 146)—in effect another version of the man not quite born of woman. Berger comments on the aspiration to be “a nation of bachelor Adams, of no woman born and unknown to women” (“Text Against Performance,” 72) without noting the extent to which this fantasy is enacted in the play; Stallybrass calls attention to this configuration and describes the structure of antithesis through which “(virtuous) families of men” are distinguished from “antifamilies of women” (“Macbeth and Witchcraft,” 198). The fantasy of escape from maternal birth and the creation of all-male lineage would probably have been of interest to King James, whose problematic derivation from Mary, Queen of Scots must occasionally have made him wish himself not born of (that particular) woman, no matter how much he was concerned publicly to rehabilitate her image. See Jonathan Goldberg's account of James's complex attitude toward Mary and especially his attempt to claim the Virgin Queen, Elizabeth, rather than Mary as his mother as he moved toward the English throne (*James I and the Politics of Literature* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983], 11-17, 25-26, 119); see also Goldberg's very suggestive discussions of James's poetic attacks on women (ibid., 24-25) and his imaging himself as a man taking control of a woman in becoming king of England (ibid., 30-31, 46). Stephen Orgel speculates brilliantly about the ways in which James's concerns about his own lineage and hence about the derivation of his royal authority are reflected in *The Tempest*: James “conceived himself as the head of a single-parent family,” as a paternal figure who has “incorporated the maternal,” in effect as a Prospero; the alternative model is Caliban, who derives his authority from his mother (“Prospero's Wife,” *Representations* 8 [1984]: 8-9). Perhaps *Macbeth* indirectly serves a cultural need to free James from entanglement with the problematic memory of his witch-mother (portrayed thus, for example, by Spenser in book 5 of *The
Faerie Queene), tracing his lineage instead from a safely distanced and safely male forefather, Banquo.

46. Although neither Berger nor Stallybrass discusses the function of Birnam Wood specifically, I am indebted here to their discussions of the ideological function of the play's appeal to cosmology in the service of patriarchy, Berger seeing it as “a collective project of mystification” (“Text Against Performance,” 64), Stallybrass as “a returning of the disputed ground of politics to the undisputed ground of Nature” (“Macbeth and Witchcraft,” 205-6). If, as Bradbrook suggests, witches were thought able to move trees (“Sources,” 42), then we have in Malcolm's gesture a literal appropriation of female power, an act of making the unnatural natural by making it serve patriarchal needs.

47. See Erickson's fine discussion of this geographic distinction (Patriarchal Structures, 121-22).

**Criticism: Gender Issues: Joost Daalder (essay date 1988)**


In the following essay, Daalder examines Shakespeare's attitude toward women as portrayed in Macbeth.

With the new interest in 'women's studies' there has been a whole flurry of works devoted to the question whether Shakespeare in any significant way discriminated against—or in favour of—women.¹

In my view, discussion of this issue is much clarified if we remember what Ruth Kelso wrote some thirty years ago concerning the debate about the matter which was conducted during the Renaissance itself:

Four attitudes can be distinguished in this confused debate. Some thought woman at best a necessary evil, some admitted her good in a limited and humble way but of inferior value compared to men, some took her as good and necessary equally with men, and some claimed superiority for her over men.²

I think that Kelso is amply supported by relevant evidence from the Renaissance (which we must carefully distinguish from the assertions of twentieth century commentators), and that her useful statement for one thing makes it very difficult to generalize about a supposedly universal ‘Renaissance attitude to women’. And, in view of that fact, we must also be cautious about accepting any argument based on the assumption that there actually was such an attitude, to which—it is then also often maintained—Shakespeare must surely have subscribed, or which he was peculiarly individualistic in resisting.

Of course, if there had been some universally accepted view, it would indeed be tempting to see Shakespeare as automatically conditioned by it, or as heroically—and Romantically—opposing it. Either conclusion would not necessarily have been justified at all, of course; but it is much easier to reject modern simplifications when we can point to complexity in the past.

I think that fortunately those who are not ideologically committed to any particular view of the world, and who are acquainted with both the Renaissance and recent studies of the period, are less and less inclined to think that it is fruitful to speak of what scholars like E. M. W. Tillyard and others who wrote several decades ago saw as ‘the Elizabethan world picture’. Even on a purely theoretical basis it surely is not likely that all Elizabethans would have felt and thought the same about everything, but the evidence is, even in very broad terms, conspicuously against such an assumption: the Renaissance was, in fact, a period of profound chance in just about every aspect of life.
Those of us who, like myself, were brought up on the thinking of such scholars as Tillyard, and who have
only recently come to concern themselves with attitudes to women in the Renaissance, may well have gone
through the following pattern of development in their beliefs. The first stage, in my own case, was that I
accepted that ‘the’ world picture of the Elizabethans was hierarchical. This did not mean that I thought that
Shakespeare felt that men were so superior to women that the latter should be seen as ‘a necessary evil’, to use
Kelso’s phrase. But I did consider it likely (without really probing the matter) that Shakespeare thought
women were sufficiently inferior to men to deserve no more than a subservient role in what he saw as
essentially a male world. In fact, then, I imputed to Shakespeare something like the second view mentioned by
Kelso, according to which in principle women were ‘good in a limited and humble way but of inferior value
compared to men’. The notion that Shakespeare's world picture was hierarchical was so firmly implanted in
me that I never contemplated the possibility that Shakespeare saw men and women as equals before I moved
on to my own second stage (Kelso's fourth view) and came to believe that Shakespeare saw women as
superior over men. In these matters, it is difficult to develop a totally dispassionate view, and I must admit
that my enthusiasm was in no small measure sparked by irritation with those who believed that Shakespeare
was contemptuously ‘sexist’ in his attitude to women. More importantly, though, I felt I was really led by the
evidence in Shakespeare’s own works.

As I held this view for some years with real conviction, and have only very recently abandoned it, I should
just briefly like to mention some of the evidence in favour of it. It does seem, to speak sweepingly, that
whenever one thinks of a character in Shakespeare who is both morally good and intellectually formidable the
example that comes to mind is a woman. For instance, in The Tempest the most admirable character, in all
respects, is Miranda, and it is surely no accident that Shakespeare presents her as willing to carry logs for
Ferdinand and able to catch him out when he cheats at chess: obviously, Shakespeare wishes to shatter any
stereotyped view of her as possibly inferior to Ferdinand, and, on the contrary, sets her up as at once superior
and his own ideal of what, at our best, we humans can be like. In several plays, Shakespeare seems to go out
of his way to suggest that women are totally capable of such things as are conventionally often thought to be
above their reach. Rosalind in As You Like It is a perfect instance. To indicate that she combines the best
‘male’ and ‘female’ qualities, Shakespeare presents her as a woman in a man's clothes who retains, by
implication, everything positive that she was able to show when presenting herself as a woman, while yet she
demonstrates that, given the chance, she can fully hold her own, as a ‘man’, in a male-dominated world. There
are several such characters, of course, and their existence always appears to suggest this same message.

It is possible that Shakespeare was personally fascinated with the image of a male-female hybrid because he
idealized the young man in the Sonnets as having both male and female characteristics. Sonnet 20 provides the
most telling evidence in this regard, and if we believe that Shakespeare was bi-sexual, we will find it the
easier to persuade ourselves that to him the perfect human being—if such a creature could be created—would
be both male and female. At all events, Shakespeare's interest in a male-female being was intense and
persistent.

Intriguingly, however, there is a contrast between Shakespeare's attitude in the Sonnets and that in the plays.
In the Sonnets, it is the young man who is described as a hermaphrodite. It would thus be possible to believe
that Shakespeare's main preference is for a male, and indeed his feeling for the dark lady could well be
described as misogynist. On the other hand, in the plays the hermaphrodites are invariably female, suggesting
that Shakespeare admires women more than men. Or are we to believe that his attitude is, after all, consistent?

I think we can, and that the seeming inconsistency is not real. The young man of the Sonnets, we must
remember, lets Shakespeare down, and in the end does not live up at all to the ideal of sonnet 20.
Assuming—not unreasonably, I think—that the Sonnets describe events more or less chronologically, this
early sonnet would indicate that one reason why Shakespeare was so attracted to the young man was that that
person was so much like a woman. But, not being a woman, the young man cannot sustain the level of people
like Miranda and Rosalind. I do not suggest that Shakespeare disapproves of all men, or approves of all
women. But I do contend that his preference is for women, and not so much sexually but because he views them as superior creatures.

That, to speak rather crudely and generally, would make Shakespeare ‘sexist’, of course. And I still think that the argument which I have outlined has merit, but I have now come to believe that it needs to be severely modified.

My change of mind has been brought about by my former student Pauline Carter and her recently completed M.A. thesis, *Between Two Spheres of Authority: The Interregna of Shakespearean Heroines*. Carter has extensively studied the way Shakespeare presents young women during the period which intervenes between the time when they were under the control of their fathers and the new stage when they will be under the authority of their husbands. Rosalind is merely one of several such women. Carter does not deny that Shakespeare sees these women as superior during their interregna. What she does refute, though, is the thought that Shakespeare therefore allows them general superiority. I may perhaps legitimately quote the following passage as illustrative of Carter's thesis:

Shakespeare's obedient Renaissance daughters become, after a short interval, obedient Renaissance wives. The freedom he allows them through the medium of their interregna, and the superiority he claims for them, place Shakespeare amongst the progressive thinkers in relation to the position of women in Renaissance society, but such progressive thinking is modified when his heroines approach marriage. In their submission to their husbands they conform to the ideal advocated by Church and State and supported by the orthodox.

(p. 50)

Upon reflection, the submission of the heroines to their husbands is indeed striking. One reason for it, as Carter argues, is no doubt that Shakespeare felt that women with independent means, like Portia and Olivia, could afford not to submit to the authority of a man, but that their position was exceptional. We may add, though, that even they are keen to get married, and to submit, at least outwardly, to the authority of their husbands. Portia, admittedly, will no doubt rule the roost. But, in general, the meekness with which women in Shakespeare accept marriage and the authority of husbands which the institution will bring with it is disconcerting to a feminist, and contrasts most oddly with the independence of mind which Shakespeare grants so many heroines during their interregna.

At the outset, I expressed my approval of Kelso's view that there were essentially four different attitudes held by Renaissance thinkers concerned with the status of women. My chief reason for satisfaction is that I think she is right. But that fact also helps me greatly in other ways. It enables me to see that, if attitudes in the Renaissance were so varied, we should not be at all surprised to find them varied now. Furthermore, it is of course not at all unlikely that a critic with a particular ideological commitment may well wish to find that reflected in Shakespeare. But, especially, where several views existed, it would not seem at all unrealistic to expect that Shakespeare's own view is complex rather than simplistic. To say that it is complex (as I believe it is) is not, however, to suggest that it is confused, or that it is indecisive. Shakespeare seems to be very clear in his mind that, although it is desirable for a woman to develop ‘male’ qualities as well as female ones, ultimately the role of a woman is quite distinct from that of a man. And this is not something we can confidently ascribe to conditioning by society: Shakespeare's women actively want to get married, and, normally, to play the part traditionally associated with being a wife. We have no reason for supposing that he sees this desire as something other than internal and innate. As far as we can tell, Shakespeare does not believe that women and men are psychologically identical, or should be.

I must therefore reluctantly part company from Robert Kimbrough, who has written some very interesting and valuable articles on androgyny, the most relevant for my present purpose being the one which he called
I use the word ‘reluctantly’ because Kimbrough's view of what life should be is appealing, as Shakespeare's would be if he agreed with Kimbrough. The latter's outlook is androgynous, and he believes Shakespeare's is too. Kimbrough holds that ‘female and male differences are, for the most part, matters of mind’, and that ‘through all of Shakespeare there runs the theme that both male and female must be liberated from the restrictions inherent in the concept of the two genders’ (p. 175).

Kimbrough emphasizes the importance of the fact that Lady Macbeth is afraid that her husband's nature will not allow him to kill Duncan:

Yet I do fear thy nature:
It is too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way.

(I.v.13-15)5

Kimbrough comments:

The phrase makes us pause, ring in our ears: ‘The milk of human kindness’. No other expression better reveals Shakespeare's basically optimistic vision of the nature of humankind (except possibly Miranda's speeches). ‘Human kindness’ was still a redundancy in Shakespeare's day because to be kind was to be human. Kindness is humanness; mankind is humankind. Mensch.

(p. 179)

As it seems to me, Kimbrough is too optimistic about Shakespeare's optimism. Certainly characters like Lear and Gloucester believe that it is natural to be kind; Edmund's vision of what is natural, however, is quite different, and Lear does not present us with a world in which kindness wins out. But, in the context of this essay, I object yet more strongly to Kimbrough's blurring of the distinction between the two sexes, and in particular of the physical difference which lies at the root of that distinction. Lady Macbeth is afraid that Macbeth is too full of the milk of human kindness. Throughout his article, Kimbrough in effect ignores the importance of the word ‘milk’, and the fact that the speaker is a woman.

My concern, by contrast, is not to show that Shakespeare thought women superior to men, or vice versa, but that he considered that there are vital physical differences between them which in turn make for important psychological distinctions. A man may well have the upper hand in certain spheres (e.g. the battlefield) and a woman in others (e.g. the home), but, while this is significant, it does not mean that in sum one of the two genders is superior to the other.

Let us be clear that it is Lady Macbeth who sees the milk of human kindness as something undesirable, not her husband. This is not because her husband is less sensitive than she, but because Shakespeare wants us to understand that it would be, in principle and ideally, natural for a woman to associate human kindness with milk. Significantly, and inevitably, Lady Macbeth does associate the two, and her perversion is the greater in rejecting her own natural feeling and projecting it onto Macbeth as though it is something perverse. Of course, she has a shallow rhetorical point: it would indeed be inappropriate for Macbeth to be too full of the milk of human kindness, because he is a man.

Lady Macbeth's attitude, therefore, is not just anti-human, as Kimbrough would make us believe, but violates essential concepts of manhood and womanhood that we should have. A little later, she says:
Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here:
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty.

(I.v.37-40)

As Shakespeare sees things, for a woman to be unsexed automatically carries with it loss of good. We cannot distinguish, in this respect, between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. As many readers have noted, the spirits invoked by Lady Macbeth may well be those which make witches what they are. They are, obviously, devilish. When those ‘women’ are first met in the play, Banquo says to them:

And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.

(You should be women,
(I.iii.45-46)

The word ‘should’ here is interesting. No doubt there is some physical evidence that the witches are not men, but presumably Banquo also means that they ought to be female: he reacts to what is unnatural and wrong about them. (Significantly, Macbeth does not.) Shakespeare is far removed from any androgynous vision. If he were really interested in obscuring distinctions, and believed that essentially men and women are/should be the same, he would not stress that the beards are a major physical oddity. One—perhaps the—reason why these women are evil is that they deny their female nature.

I think that Shakespeare implies that there is a real choice involved. The women ought to be female: if they were, they would not have beards. I believe that this is what Shakespeare intends because of his attitude to the unsexing of Lady Macbeth. In this connection, we ought to consider the curious matter of Lady Macbeth’s offspring.

Ever since the time that L. C. Knights made a mockery of the question ‘How many children had Lady Macbeth?’, critics have been timid about tackling the very real problem in interpretation that arises from Lady Macbeth saying ‘I have given suck’ (I.vii.54), whereas Macbeth himself complains about his ‘barren sceptre’ (III.i.61).

Certainly no naturalistic reading is likely to make sense of this strange discrepancy. Shakespeare apparently does not ask us to postulate (for he provides no hint to that effect) about a child which Lady Macbeth had before her marriage to Macbeth, about a child which was theirs but which has meanwhile died, etc. One might feel inclined to read something into the fact that Macbeth considers his sceptre barren because no son of his will succeed (III.i.63), but he does not put any emphasis on the gender of the child himself, and we have absolutely no evidence for believing that the Macbeths have a daughter.

Often, and naturally enough, critics suggest in cases like this that there are times when Homer, or Shakespeare, nods, and that there is some untidiness in the writing. And again and again we are reminded that Shakespeare’s drama is not ‘realistic’, so that we should not look into this kind of inconsistency too closely.

I would agree that Shakespeare is probably not ‘realistic’ in a case like this, but that is not to say that we must not pay close attention to the oddity that apparently at one time Lady Macbeth had, according to her own admission, a child while no such child occurs in the action of the play, anywhere.

What symbolic significance is the discrepancy likely to have, supposing that it is deliberate on Shakespeare’s part? I think there is an obvious explanation which fits in well with Shakespeare’s general intention in the
play. We probably are asked to believe that by nature Lady Macbeth was fertile, and indeed the sort of woman who wishes to have children, in one part of her mind. For she not only claims that she has ‘given suck’, but that she knows ‘How tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me’ (I.vii.55). Her natural inclination is, therefore, maternal, if only she followed her instinct. But, in her conscious mind, she rejects this inclination. It is not as though her society has taught her to be ‘male’ in any sense. Rather, she does not accept the role which her nature would assign to her, but, of her own volition, denies her deepest instincts to herself. She opts not to act on her physical and mental womanhood, but to turn herself into a ‘man’ instead. The consequence, thus Shakespeare implies, is loss of womanhood to the extent that she makes herself infertile. Thus, whether she ever had a child or not, she certainly cannot have one when once she adopts the mentality which the play shows her as having chosen for herself. Thus inevitably Macbeth’s sceptre is indeed ‘barren’.

Traditionally, we perhaps associate the wish to have children with women rather than men. Men, it is often felt, can manage without offspring in that, at any rate prior to the time when women began to look for work outside the home, their mind is filled with concern about their career, while to women children are essential if they are to have faith in the value of their existence. It is worth remembering, in this respect, that on the whole, in Shakespeare’s time, a woman’s ‘place’, to use the modern expression, was, in fact, ‘in the home’. It therefore would not be illogical to suppose that, however enlightened Shakespeare may have been in principle, it would have been difficult for him to imagine a situation in which women could find fulfilment by working outside the home and not having children, or by having children as well as a job. This is not to say that Shakespeare could not understand Lady Macbeth’s wish to be like a man—to be successful in a non-domestic sphere. But, clearly, in adopting that goal, Lady Macbeth sacrifices her womanhood. And this is the more so because her idea of what it means to be a man is absurdly restricted in its ‘macho’ emphasis: to be a man, she feels, one has to be prepared to kill, and not just on the battlefield, but also in one’s own home (a major irony, here) and in the criminal cause of satisfying one’s ambition against all considerations of what is proper when one entertains one’s king and one’s kinsman, as well as one’s guest and someone who has borne his faculties so meek, has been so clear in his great office, etc., etc. (cf. Macbeth's ‘If it were done when ’tis done’, I.vii.1-27).

It is one of the more interesting features of this play that Shakespeare does not present Macbeth as a man who wishes to have no children. On the contrary, he clearly would like to have them, and it is his being without them which is one of the driving forces in his destructive course of action.

The main force, of course, is his ambition. In this respect, we must not forget that, typically, it is Macbeth himself, not his wife, who initiates the idea of killing Duncan. His guilty conscience is obvious the moment the witches, very early in the play, hail him as a future king, and Banquo says:

Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair?

(I.iii.51-52)

And again a little later, when he has just been made Thane of Cawdor, and he reflects in an aside:

The greatest is behind.

(Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor!

(I.iii.116-17)

Still in this scene, when he is found to be absentminded, he excuses himself by saying that his ‘dull brain was wrought / With things forgotten’ (lines 149-50). But perhaps the most conclusive proof of his initiative comes in I.vii, when Macbeth says ‘I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none’, and his wife
replies:

_That made you break this enterprise to me?_  
(72x699)

_prior to this scene, there is no evidence within the play of Macbeth breaking the enterprise to her, and we are clearly asked to believe that he mentioned it to her at some stage well into the past. This should come as no surprise to us. As a man, Macbeth can be expected—presumably for what are essentially biological/psychological reasons—to wish to advance his career.

But once he has killed Duncan and is king, he does not stop murdering. And it is at this stage that Macbeth's preoccupation with children becomes obvious. Again, I do not think that the play in any sense leads us to consider it unnatural for him to want to be a father. Such a desire is not at all incompatible with manhood. But this wish is one of the most important things to set Macbeth apart from his wife. Later in the play, the Maccus are shown as both caring for children. Lady Macbeth, however, has no children because she wishes to kill; Macbeth kills because he has no children, and cannot stand those who have. While I have no wish to defend Macbeth, I think that Shakespeare sees him as perverting his manhood less than Lady Macbeth does her womanhood. It is, indeed, a contrast between them that Macbeth is more closely in touch with both his own deepest wishes and the workings of society. The two are no doubt connected, possibly because as a man he is more exposed to contact with other members of society than his wife is, and therefore, understanding the reality around him more, is also more likely to understand himself better.

The chief reason which Macbeth offers (in the soliloquy ‘To be thus is nothing’) for murdering Banquo is that he fears his being. But he is not at all specific about what Banquo might undertake against him, and it soon becomes clear that in fact he is jealous of Banquo because Banquo does have a son, and the witches have prophesied that his children will be kings:

_They hail’d him father to a line of kings._  
_April my head they plac’d a fruitless crown_  
_And put a barren sceptre in my griepe,_  
_Thence to be wrench’d with an unlineal hand,_  
_No son of mine succeeding. If’t be so,_  
_For Banquo’s issue have I fil’d my mind;_  
_For them the gracious Duncan have I murder’d._  

(III.i.59-65)

Macbeth has considerable understanding of what tortures him about the existence of Banquo and his son. It is part of his manhood, however, that he seeks the resolution of his problem in violence. I think we have little reason for believing that Shakespeare does not see violence as much more characteristic of men than of women. The sergeant who at the beginning of the play gives an account of the way in which Macbeth kills Maccus, one of the rebels against King Duncan, comments how Macbeth fought

_Till he unseam’d him from the nave to th’chaps,_  
_And fix’d his head upon our battlements._  

(I.i.22-23)

We may well want to question Duncan's immediate response: ‘O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!’ But it is not evident that Shakespeare disapproves of Macbeth's action, or Duncan's comment; and in any case, whether or not he does, he appears to be in no doubt that this is how men behave. Thus, in principle, the action of
killing is more congenial to Macbeth than to his wife—not because of individual differences between them, but because it is part of the role of a man to engage in violence. Therefore, despite Lady Macbeth’s ‘macho’ talk it is Macbeth who is the murderer in the play.

The play shows how his character deteriorates as he moves from lawful killing to increasingly evil butchery. At first, he is presented very much as a courageous soldier (Duncan’s ‘valiant cousin’). When he kills Duncan, the thought of progeny is not yet important to him, though it is not absent. In I.vii, Macbeth firmly resolves upon the murder of Duncan. His wife has rejected offspring:

I have given suck, and know
How tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me—
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash’d the brains out …

(lines 54-58)

Macbeth does not respond to this terrifying denial of motherhood, but, when his wife later persuades him that there is no danger of failure, Macbeth says:

Bring forth men-children only;
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males.

(lines 72-74)

We may dislike the fact that he praises his wife for being like a male, as well as his wish for ‘men-children’; but he is quite unlike his wife in that he does not reject fatherhood.

Even so, at this stage it is Duncan's death only which he has in mind, not that of children which he cannot have. This changes when he plans the murder of Fleance, and especially when Fleance escapes. Yet even then Macbeth's attitude is less bizarre than when he decides to have Macduff's wife and children killed. Fleance, after all, may wish to take his crown away from him (‘the worm that's fled / Hath nature that in time will venom breed’—III.iii.29-30). But he has absolutely nothing to fear from Macduff's family; yet he decides:

The castle of Macduff I will surprise,
Seize upon Fife, give to the edge o' th' sword
His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
That trace him in his line.

(IV.i.150-53)

Obviously, in a crazy way, his fear that others may oust him from his throne is connected with his wish to kill their children even if those cannot harm him, and a yet more potent reason for that wish, even if unconsciously, must be that he has no children of his own to succeed him.

Macduff, I think, understands this factor in Macbeth's psychology. Critics are often puzzled by Macduff’s remark, upon hearing that his wife and children are dead: ‘He has no children’ (IV.iii.216). Indeed, in the context ‘He’ might seem to be Malcolm. But it is much more likely to be Macbeth, and to mean: ‘He, Macbeth, has no children—and that is why he has killed mine.’

Shakespeare thus sees a wish for fatherhood as a perfectly normal thing in a man, and he explains that, in Macbeth's case at least, that wish is in fact a desire to continue one's own existence into the future.
Presumably, Lady Macbeth finds it easier to deny her maternal instinct because she does not share Macbeth's typically male preoccupation with such a continued existence. Indeed, it is one of the most important elements of her mental make-up that she lives for the moment, for the immediate here-and-now, rather than for anything larger, in time or place. I believe that Shakespeare sees this tendency in her character as typically female. I do not mean that he shows himself misogynist in this. Rather, he appears to imply throughout the play that it is inevitable, given their role in society and possibly the way they are made, that women have a more restricted vision than men. Neither should we see it as admirable in Macbeth that he can look further; as a male, he has simply been equipped to do so.

Examples of Lady Macbeth's curious shortsightedness are abundant in the play. She herself would like to overcome it. When we first see the Macbeths discussing the possibility of murdering Duncan, in I.iv, Lady Macbeth declares that she will herself take charge of it: 'you shall put / This night's great business into my dispatch' (lines 64-65). Yet, in the event, she is not up the task she has set herself, as the instinct which she tries to ignore asserts itself: 'Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done’t’ (II.ii.12-13). It appears to be typical of her, as a woman, to try and cast herself into a role which she thinks she should assume. Therefore, she sets herself goals of which she has no real understanding. Shakespeare seems to believe that a woman is more prone to make this mistake than a man as she is only superficially in touch with the world outside the home: things are done for the sake of appearance without real thought as to the consequences. Thus, for example, after the murder of Duncan Lady Macbeth says to her husband: ‘A little water clears us of this deed’ (II.ii.67). She not only thinks (foolishly) that she can wash off her sin in the eyes of God, but also that it will be far from difficult to hide their crime from the view of others (her next words are ‘How easy is it then!’). But the people around her are far more suspicious than she thinks. Although she tries to bury her fears in her unconscious, she does not succeed in keeping them there. It would appear that Shakespeare considers that this situation is more likely to occur in the case of a woman than a man. A man is less likely to hide things from himself for two reasons: he is in closer contact with the outside world, and he is less sensitive to other human beings (Lady Macbeth does know, in a way that no man can, how tender 'tis to love the babe that milks her). Thus, despite her attempt to be more ‘macho’ than her husband, Lady Macbeth ends up with her unconscious asserting itself. When she walks in her sleep (V.i), she expresses her surprise that Duncan had so much blood in him, and raises the possibility that her hands will never be clean.

Macbeth is often seen as someone who has more imagination than his wife. I do not think that is quite the point: rather, he is more directly in contact with the reality of things, and therefore his unconscious sends its messages to him more quickly, no matter whether the message is one of desire or of fear. That is why he so readily sees a dagger, or Banquo's ghost. I think it is a mistake to believe that he has better knowledge of right and wrong than his wife and acts more on his conscience. Let us for example examine some of his reasoning in his famous soliloquy before the murder of Duncan, ‘If it were done when ’tis done’ (I.vii.1-27):

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Could trammel up the consequence, and catch,
With his surcease, success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here—
But here upon this bank and shoal of time—
We’d jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgment here, that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which being taught return
To plague th’inventor.
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This is not the talk of someone who cares about right and wrong, but who is speculating on the consequences of his deed. He first wonders whether he can escape unhurt here on earth; if so, he’d ‘jump the life to come’. Punishment in the after-life, in other words, is hardly of concern to him; his mind is on his mortal existence. The lack of regard for metaphysics is not, as it would be in the case of his wife, due to a restricted vision: he rejects what he is aware of, but he is aware of it nonetheless. He is similarly aware of the fact that it will be
very difficult to gain what he wants ‘here’ in this life. He realizes that his action may serve as an example to others, so that it may rebound on him. He is not in any sense morally superior to his wife, but merely has a different, more ‘male’ kind of insight.

But, we may wonder, does he not show similar confusion in allowing himself to be swayed by the witches? I do not think so. Lady Macbeth psychologically does not need the witches, as she is fully capable of engendering her own evil and believing in it as something she can get away with. Macbeth is no less evil, but worries more about the consequences of his actions. Hence the witches, like his wife, serve the function of strengthening him in his evil inclinations, of providing a reality (as it seems) in which he can believe. We must note that they do not actually lie: it is true, for example, that Macduff is not ‘of woman born’. We may think that the witches trick him, and so indeed they do, for they are evil, but they can only make Macbeth believe what he wishes to believe anyway. We may well once again see Shakespeare making an important comment on gender in this. The man is more doubtful than the woman (Lady Macbeth) about the results of his actions because he knows the ways of the world better. But, unlike Lady Macbeth, he is incapable of coming to conclusions independently: he needs female comforting, from both his wife and the witches.

Lady Macbeth is not, however, herself a witch, and hence she comes to a very bad end. It would be wrong to say that Macbeth was able to predict at all completely what their life would be like after the murder of Duncan. Even so, he had a better notion, and indeed understands the misery of his situation fairly clearly immediately after the murder: ‘from this instant, / There’s nothing serious in mortality’ (II.iii.90-91). Lady Macbeth, however, has more suffering in store for her exactly because she has tried to repress all female feeling which, therefore, will inevitably create havoc in her unconscious and finally seek a violent way out. Thus she must die. Her tragedy is the greater because of her loneliness. Shakespeare implies that after the murder of Duncan Macbeth treats her with typically male disdain. Planning Banquo's murder, he will not tell her about it: ‘Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, / Till thou applaud the deed’ (III.iii.45-46). It is probably significant that Macbeth is now king and that this new murder is to be committed outside the domestic sphere; as he judges, this leaves no place for his wife.

Healthier notions of manhood and womanhood exist in the case of the Macduffs. The first thing we may notice about them as setting them apart from the Macbeths is that they have children, and deeply care about them. This appears to make for a less violent outlook, although it is to be observed that this is a far more pronounced phenomenon in the case of the women than in that of the men. Lady Macbeth's violence seems to be strongly connected with her infertility; presumably Shakespeare wishes us to believe that her violence was always a feature of her character, that it caused infertility after initial fertility, and that her barrenness then in turn further increased her violence. Lady Macduff is both fertile and non-aggressive. In fact, while Lady Macbeth has an unnatural desire to mingle in men's affairs, Lady Macduff does not understand them. When Macduff leaves for England, Lady Macduff reacts with puzzlement and indignation:

Lady Macd. What had he done
to make him fly the land?
Ross. You must have patience, madam.
L. Macd. He had none;
His flight was madness. When our actions do not,
Our fears do make us traitors.

(IV.ii.1-4)

Superficially, Lady Macduff may have a point about her husband's fear. In truth, however, she does not know what world she is living in. Shortly afterwards, a messenger warns her that she is in danger; but she stays where she is, and gets killed, with her children. Macduff's flight should thus be seen as, for one thing, an act of caution. The realm would not have been served if he had been killed. For, and this is a second major point that his wife fails to grasp, his wellbeing is essential to that of Scotland. It is his male responsibility to
establish contact with Malcolm so that the two of them can restore order in the kingdom, a process in which Macduff plays a vital part by not only assisting Malcolm generally—as the future and lawful king—but also by killing Macbeth.

It is possible to make a good deal of Macduff's sensitivity to his wife and children when he hears of their death. Certainly, his attitude is contrasted with Macbeth's when the latter says about his wife, ‘She should have died hereafter’ (V.v.17). Macduff, when informed of the loss of his family, is admonished by Malcolm:

Dispute it like a man.

(IV.iii.220)

Engagingly, he replies:

But I must also feel it as a man.

To be male does not mean that one cannot and should not feel human grief. In an instance like this, Shakespeare rejects the ‘macho’ stereotype. However, there is time for momentary grief only, as his male duty calls Macduff. Malcolm encourages him to turn his grief into anger, which Macduff does proceed to do, whereupon Malcolm can say with satisfaction:

This tune goes manly.

(IV.iii.235)

At the end of the play, we become strongly aware that Shakespeare's world is male-dominated. If Macduff had to lose his wife and children that was a serious matter, but one for private grief; and private grief is less important than his role as a warrior who must secure a harmonious state of affairs in Scotland. I do not think that Shakespeare leaves us in doubt that Macduff must do what he does.

Lady Macbeth, who so much tried to live up to an extreme ‘macho’ image, has failed miserably. She has perverted her womanhood, and shown that she could not successfully maintain herself in a male-dominated world. Her death is, we must surely concede, less glamorous than her husband's. I do not, of course, mean that Shakespeare idealizes Macbeth's violence. Nevertheless, violence is more appropriate in him than in his wife, and it is difficult to avoid some admiration for his bravery (against all logical odds) at the end of the play.

My case is not that Shakespeare offers us a ‘sexist’ view which amounts to a simple preference for men. Obviously, we are not asked to view Macbeth more positively than Lady Macduff; the latter may well be wrong in her assessment of her husband's motives, but this is a pardonable misjudgment which is far less serious than Macbeth's set of crimes. But even though Shakespeare is anxious to avoid anything like blunt stereotyping (so that, for example, he stresses that Macduff must feel his grief as a man), he appears to have a very strong sense of certain traits of mind and actions as ‘male’ and others as ‘female’. It would not do, of course, to suggest that Shakespeare's view as developed in this play is necessarily identical to his attitude as embodied elsewhere in his work. But even the joyous comedies, which might temporarily give us the feeling that women like Rosalind or Viola are really not unlike men, must be read with an awareness of the fact that in the end Shakespeare does not allow them a role similar to that of a man.

*Macbeth* is crucially important, in our context, for enabling us to see that Shakespeare above all relates the differences between male and female roles to the significant fact that women are childbearers and men are not. But he does not stop there. He also appears to emphasize that there are certain spheres of activity in which it is
disastrous for a woman to interfere, not only in that such an adoption of a ‘male’ role harms others, but also in that it injures the woman herself: Lady Macbeth possibly hurts herself more than anyone else.

Shakespeare sees it as a distinct disadvantage that our male-dominated society is inclined towards violence—a tendency which good women like Lady Macduff do not share. Nevertheless, order in such a society can only be maintained by men, and, although they should not be unfeeling, and fight in the right cause, they must be prepared to secure peace by engaging in battle and bloodshed. There is no evidence that Shakespeare can imagine a society in which women would be, and do, much the same as men.

Notes


3. Flinders University of South Australia (South Australia 5042), 1987. At the time of writing, the thesis had been awarded an M.A., but not yet been accepted for publication. It certainly is to be hoped that it will be. I am much indebted to Ms Carter for what I have learned from her during the last two years or so.


**Criticism: Gender Issues: William T. Liston (essay date 1989)**


[In the following essay, Liston examines gender issues and sex roles in Macbeth, and theorizes that when men and women step out of their defined roles they lose their humanity.]

Probably none of Shakespeare's plays is so explicit in demarcating man from woman as is *Macbeth.* *Man* (including the plural and such obvious derivatives as *manly*, *manhood*, and *unnamed*) appears more than 40 times, almost always with a conscious sense of defining the term—or rather, of defining a person by the term. *Woman* (including similar formations) appears about a third as frequently, with a similar sense of precise definition.
The most obvious examples of this defining process appear in the preparations for the murder of Duncan and
in the discovery of it (1.7 and 2.3); in the preparations for the murder of Banquo and the Banquet scene (3.1 and 3.4); and in the scene in which Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty (4.3). In all of these scenes, what is at
issue is a definition of human nature. (Nature and derivatives appear 27 times; and kind, with similar
meaning, as in the “milk of human kindness,” appears a few times also.) In several instances the words take
on a highly sexual meaning, as when Lady Macbeth challenges Macbeth's manhood prior to the murder of
Duncan and questions it during his apparent hallucinations in the Banquet scene. Similarly, she is highly
conscious of her own sexuality when she speaks of her “woman's breasts” while calling on the “spirits / That
tend on mortal thoughts” to “unsex me here” so that she will not be impeded in her plan by “compunctions
visitations of nature” (1.5).¹ What presents itself here is a conflation of sex roles and of gender, and a
demonstration that human beings are by nature sexual beings. When men and women step outside these sex
and gender roles, they lose their humanity. Their liberation from definition destroys them; paradoxically, in
fact, it confines them. After their great crime, Macbeth feels “cabin’d, cribb’d, confin’d, bound in / To saucy
doubts and fears” (3.4.23-24), and Lady Macbeth is imprisoned within her own sick mind.

After the witches' short opening scene, the first line of the play is Duncan's “What bloody man is that?” The
man in question is the sergeant who reports brave Macbeth's bloody deeds. And immediately we are on the
way to a definition of man as Bellona's bridegroom, a being who is valiant, courageous, and essentially a
person committed to direct, unreflective physical action. Just as immediately, however, this simple definition
is undermined as Macbeth and Banquo meet the witches, who “should be women” (1.3.45) but whose beards
belie their sex. It is further undermined a few moments later as Macbeth, yielding to the suggestion that he
actively try to bring about his accession to the kingship, finds “my seated heart knock at my ribs, / Against the
use of nature.” The thought shakes his “single state of man” (134-140). Single here is glossed by most modern
editors as “weak,” but Kenneth Muir notes “Grierson [in his 1914 edition]—I think rightly—says that single
here means ‘indivisible’ and the phrase as a whole ‘my composite nature—body, spirits, etc., made one by the
soul.’”² Though either sense can be correct—and possibly both are—my sense of the lines accords with that
of Muir and Grierson. Integrity is the word that the entire phrase “single state of man” suggests. (This is
precisely the contention of Richard Horwich in “Integrity in Macbeth: The Search for the ‘Single State of
Man.’”³)

Oddly, though Macbeth is ostensibly concerned with regicide and kingship, with the fate of a kingdom, the
play proceeds on the values of a domestic tragedy. Whereas the history plays and the Roman plays enact their
public values in public spaces, several of the tragedies—this one especially—seem to take place indoors and
to focus on the values that are defined by and embodied in personal and familial relationships. Certainly the
play begins on the battlefield where the integrity of the nation is called into question, and it ends there also,
even if the final scene is staged in Macbeth's castle. But the scenes we remember most—those in the great
middle of the play—are indoor scenes, dependent upon the relationship of husband and wife, of man and
woman.

The word man first appears near the end of 1.4, as Macbeth tells Duncan that “I'll be myself the harbinger,
and make joyful / The hearing of my wife with your approach” (45-46). The Folio opening stage direction for
the next scene reads “Enter Macbeths Wife with a Letter.” Though it is true that Lady Macbeth's speech prefix
is consistently Lady, and that several other stage directions (e.g., 1.6.10 and 1.7.28) read enter Lady, Lady
Macbeth is not initially defined in her own right but regarded as an extension of her husband.

Likewise, the first appearance of husband is Lady Macbeth's anxious breaking off from “Had he not
resembled / My father as he slept, I had done’t” to greet “My husband!” (2.2.13) as Macbeth enters to
announce “I have done the deed.” But the word has ironically been anticipated by Banquo's statement at the
beginning of the preceding scene that “There’s husbandry in heaven, / Their candles are all out” (4-5). There
is husbandry on earth also, and the snuffing of Duncan is its product.
As Macbeth’s wife, Lady Macbeth is perceived and judged according to the roles and functions that a proper wife fulfills and performs. Given her station, there are two: to provide heirs to her lord, and to be his hostess. It is in the latter capacity that Duncan regards her as he arrives at Inverness: “See, see, our honor’d hostess!” (1.6.10). Surely it is no accident that Duncan’s exclamation completes a speech of Banquo’s that alludes to the child-bearing role:

This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting marlet, does approve,
By his lov’d mansionry, that the heaven’s breath
Smell wooingly here; no jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made his pendant bed and procreant cradle.
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observ’d
The air is delicate.

(3-10)

The scene concludes with subtle but nevertheless insistent emphasis on the role of both the hostess and the host, Duncan asserting “Fair and noble hostess, / We are your guest to-night” (24-25), and finally going off with—

Give me your hand.

Conduct me to mine host, we love him highly,
And shall continue our graces towards him.
By your leave, hostess.

Host and hostess appear only once more each, in the immediately succeeding scenes. As Macbeth contemplates the murder of Duncan—“If it were done,” etc.—he pauses to consider arguments against the murder.

He’s here in double trust:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host.

(1.7.12-14)

The crime of regicide is in Macbeth’s mind, but not prominently. He is conscious of Duncan’s “great office” (18) and of his own subjection to that office, but much more conscious of the domestic demands imposed upon kinsmen and hosts.

In the following scene, shortly after he notes the “husbandry in heaven,” Banquo informs Macbeth that

the King’s a-bed.

(2.1.12-16)

In this apparently simple statement, just moments before the murder, the offices of host and hostess, the roles of wife, and nature—alluded to in kind—are all mentioned, casually; and all are about to be violated.

That Lady Macbeth is ambitious is unquestioned. But what is she ambitious for? She first appears in 1.5,
reading Macbeth's letter, and chills us as she starts to lay the plans that will culminate in Duncan's death after his fatal entrance “Under my battlements,” the instrument being “my keen knife.” Yet nowhere, neither here nor elsewhere, does she ask for anything for herself, in her own right. She apostrophically addresses Macbeth with,

That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,  
And chastise with the valor of my tongue  
All that impedes thee from the golden round,  
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem  
To have thee crown'd withal.

(25-30)

At the end of the scene, but not before, she finally includes herself in the profit to be gained from the enterprise, and then only in general terms:

This night's great business into my dispatch,  
Which shall to all our nights and days to come  
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.

(67-70)

The terms of simple domestic relationships dominate 4.2, in which Lady Macduff and her son are murdered. In this scene, the great world is in the distance, but not forgotten. What we are concerned with here is father, mother, husband, wife, babes, and, as always, natural, as well as man and woman. The point of the scene comes to focus in Lady Macduff's speech immediately after she is warned of the approaching danger by the “homely man”:

I have done no harm. But I remember now  
I am in this earthly world—where to do harm  
Is often laudable, to do good sometime  
Accounted dangerous folly. Why then, alas,  
Do I put up that womanly defense,  
To say I have done no harm?

(73-79)

Perversely, “womanly defense” should be “manly defense.” Her defense—that only those who have done wrong need fear danger—is perfect logic, ideal logic: the kind of logic that reasonable men, rather than emotional women, supposedly use. But Macbeth has so perverted “this earthly world” that logic no longer obtains, and a reasonable defense, a “womanly defense,” is absurd. The innocent, and innocence, are destroyed in such a world.

Not a particularly attractive scene in performance (one wonders if Shakespeare had ever seen or heard a real child) because so much of it is dominated by Macduff's “witty” child playing straight-man to his mother, this scene more than any other concentrates on the familial relationships and the disruption of these bonds and relationships.

An equally difficult scene, both in reading and performance, immediately follows; it is an almost actionless scene likely to bore both a reader and a spectator, and yet it brings together all the values and concerns of the play. The scene divides into two halves, Malcolm's testing of Macduff's loyalty, and Macduff's responses (and
reactions) upon being informed of the slaughter of his family. These scenic beats are separated by lines concerned with the king’s evil (140-159).

In his testing of Macduff, Malcolm accuses himself in general terms of being as bad as Macbeth. Finally, he focuses on “The cestern of my lust” (63) as the defining sin of his viciousness. Macduff’s reply—“Boundless intemperance / In nature is a tyranny” (66-67)—is as good a statement of the theme of the play as can be found, and yet it seems almost a throw-away line, hardly noticed. Scotland can absorb such intemperance: “We have willing dames enough.” The simplicity and honesty of women has given way to the pretentious dames in this debasing context.

Malcolm goes on to claim other vices such as avarice, but still Macduff raises no serious objection: “All these are portable” (89). Malcolm then disclaims all virtues, asserting—

> Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell,  
> Uproar the universal peace, confound  
> All unity on earth.

(97-100)

And at this point Macduff proves his loyalty to Malcolm and to virtue in rejecting Malcolm as unfit to govern.

Is it the word milk that affects Macduff so strongly? The word has been used thrice earlier in the play, always by Lady Macbeth (“th’ milk of human kindness” [1.5.17]; “take my milk for gall” [1.5.48]; and “the babe that milks me” [1.7.55]), and in every case the image has amounted to a perversion of nature. Here, for the fourth time in the play—more than in any other Shakespearean play—the word appears again, and the equation is made through the image that peace is a feminine function and concern. Certainly the chief concern of Macduff’s wife was peace.

Having convinced himself of Macduff’s virtue, Malcolm denies all the intemperate desires of which he had accused himself as “strangers to my nature,” and goes on to assure Macduff that “I am yet / Unknown to woman” (125-26). Ludicrous as this statement seems to be in equating ignorance (or innocence—both words reverberate throughout the play) of woman with manly goodness and virtue, it cannot be ignored. Does it mean that sexual knowledge is the knowledge of good and evil? This is a simplistic answer, especially in this play, which aims at a much richer definition of man, but no better answer suggests itself.

As Ellen J. O’Brien says in an article on teaching Shakespeare, Macduff’s “understanding of the ambiguity of things intensifies in this scene”; Malcolm’s testing of him amounts to a development of the “fair is foul” theme. Following the clarification of his misconceptions regarding Malcolm, he is informed of the savage slaughter of his wife and babes, and the familiar terms of familial relationships come to the fore again, as do the terms of gender.

Momentarily reduced almost to inarticulateness and broken lines—in fact, after trying to forget the humanness of his wife and children by referring to them as chickens and their dam (218)—Macduff is urged by Malcolm to “Dispute it like a man.” His reply—“I shall do so; / But I must also feel it as a man” (220-21)—signals the broader definition of man as someone capable of sympathy usually conceived of as feminine. Macduff goes on to say that “I could play the woman with mine eyes” (230), countenancing tears as a legitimate part of a warrior’s psyche. When, a moment later, upon Macduff’s resolution to pursue Macbeth at once, Malcolm approvingly states “This tune goes manly,” he is of course referring to Macduff’s warlike determination; but we sense also a larger and more encompassing definition of manly than had been present earlier in the play, even if Malcolm is not aware of the full implications of what he says. It is easy to agree with Robert
Kimbrough, who says, “I would like to think that Malcom [sic] has understood the full significance of what he has seen and heard and intends ‘manly’ to mean more than bravely—but I doubt it.”

Though the play belongs to the Macbeths, the assertion of the fuller and more complex values of peace and family and humanity are stated and dramatized most positively in the Macduffs, despite Lady Macduff’s complaint that in leaving her and their children Macduff “wants the natural touch” (4.2.9). Macduff’s willingness to regard as natural to man the possession and even the expression of emotion posits a richer definition of man than merely that of a male capable of unflinching courage in battle and in the face of death. This definition counters that implied by the First Murderer—“We are men, my liege” (3.1.90)—as beings capable of killing remorselessly out of mere envy and resentment. Lady Macduff’s instinctive resort to the procreant birds in her desperate plight—

The most diminutive of birds, will fight,  
Her young ones in her nest—

(4.2.9-11)

alludes to the barren and unnatural Lady Macbeth whose castle bears the outward signs of a pleasant seat in providing safety for the marlet but no protection for humanity: indeed harbors no humanity.

In short, the norm against which Macbeth works is a traditional definition of man as valorous, firm, commanding, humane, and limited; and a traditional definition of woman as soft, maternal, nourishing, a help meet to her husband, humane, and limited. The proper man and the proper woman are both richer than the simplistic stereotype even in the fairly restricted world of this play; but essential to full humanity is limitation within that defined role.

Notes

6. After sending this paper off for publication, I read Laurence Olivier’s autobiography, Confessions of an Actor (1982; New York: Penguin, 1984), in which, after telling us that he and his wife Vivien Leigh promised during the summer of 1954 to play Macbeth at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, he adds the comment that “as Sybil Thorndike always said, ‘You must be married to play the Macbeths’” (198).

This paper had its genesis in a Seminar on Shakespearean Tragedy and Gender organized by Shirley Nelson Garner for the 1987 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, and profited from the criticism of that group.

Macbeth (Vol. 57): Criticism: Psychological Approaches

In the following essay, originally delivered in 1991, Reid contends that the three murders committed by Macbeth are representative of the three distinctive stages of evil that evolve in his psyche.

Macbeth is a milestone in man's exploration of ... this “depth of things” which our age calls the unconscious.

Harold Goddard, The Meaning of Shakespeare

Interpreters of Macbeth have focused almost exclusively on the first murder, the killing of a king in Acts I-II, as the basis for understanding the play—its social, psychological, and metaphysical meanings. Macbeth's subsequent two assassinations, of Banquo in Act III, and of Macduff's wife and children in Acts IV-V, are either ignored, or are treated simply as efforts to secure the usurped crown, or perhaps as a kind of Freudian “repetition compulsion”—the blooded man's first heinous kill engendering serial slayings. Neither of the subsequent murders has been accorded its own distinctive meaning and psychological motivation; they are seen as mere shadowy reenactments of the Oedipal complex which is presumed to underlie the one essential crime, the slaying of the patriarchal king.

As R. A. Foakes puts it, “the murder of Duncan was the equivalent in mountaineering terms of scaling Everest, and after this [Macbeth] has no trouble with lower hills.” This exclusive highlighting of the regicide (as the “be-all and end-all” of the play) entails, however, that the final three acts must dwindle from real theatrical power to melodramatic spectacle—a result of the victims' shrinking symbolic import and, correspondingly, the shrinking spiritual grandeur of the protagonists, who deliver fewer and fewer eloquent soliloquies, consign their villainies to hired thugs, and finally are swept aside by the nobler (but less charismatic) avengers, Macduff and Malcolm. Many astute critics of the play—including Bradley, Rossiter, Heilman, Sanders, Jorgensen, Mack, Kirsch, and Muir—have struggled with this central conundrum: can the playwright sustain great tragedy if the only true kingly spirit is dispatched at the outset?

Like most of these critics, I believe that Macbeth's capacious mind, despite its moral degeneration, remains at center stage, showing the horrific consequences of a truly heroic spirit embracing evil. But instead of conceiving the tragedy as one great cosmos-shaking act of regicide followed by two subordinate aftershocks, I would characterize the Macbeths' journey into darkness as three equally significant stages of spiritual catastrophe, three distinctive and theatrically-potent dimensions of evil as it evolves and festers in the human psyche. Macbeth murders first a parental ruler, then a brotherly friend (his “chiefest friend” according to Holinshed), and finally a mother and her children. His victims thus represent the three fundamental human bonds, together comprising (in reverse order) the three basic stages of human maturation, or the three essential cathexes of the human psyche. Thus, in the course of the three murders Macbeth deconstructs the entire psychological infrastructure of human identity. Shakespeare's awareness of this pattern is underscored by its earlier prototypical appearance in Richard III, where that villain-hero similarly kills a king (Henry VI), then a brother (Clarence), then children (the Princes). In Macbeth, however, the playwright is much more fully apprised of the scheme's psychological implications, which he methodically exploits.

The dramaturgical design of Macbeth precisely emphasizes this three-phase pattern: Acts I and II present, in a continuous sequence, the regicide and its immediate consequences; Act III shows the murder of Banquo and then its impact on Macbeth at the banquet; Acts IV and V, another continuous cycle of action, presents the slaughter of Macduff's family, then its social and psychological consequences. This 2-1-2 structure, the dramaturgic pattern of all of Shakespeare's mature tragedies, perfectly accommodates his treatment of Macbeth's three murders.

To attain this neatly coherent pattern of psychological devolution, Shakespeare has drastically altered Holinshed's Chronicles—first, by condensing all the major crises of Duncan's six-year reign and of Macbeth's seventeen-year reign into the two-hour traffic of the stage. The entire battery of wars and
assassinations seems to transpire in a matter of days, rather than a quarter of a century, making the three murders (as well as the broader framework of political violence in Acts I and V) seem closely and causally connected.

Equally striking is Shakespeare's moral reshaping of the victims, casting them as iconically benevolent members of the human family, in order to accommodate his three-fold tragic pattern. Instead of the chronicles' portrait of a weak, cowardly, and greedy king, about the same age as his cousin Macbeth, Shakespeare portrays Duncan as aged, humble, and generous—an ideal, almost saintly monarch. Similarly Banquo, in the chronicles a co-conspirator in regicide, is recast as a devoted friend in life's warfare, modestly resisting each temptation to which his colleague falls prey. Likewise Macduff, who in the chronicles enters the story belatedly, mainly seeking personal revenge, is transmuted into an ever-present touchstone of charitable social compassion—the Man of Feeling who best embodies what his wife and babes, those “strong knots of love,” represent: the most primitive human bond. It is Macduff's horrified response to Duncan's murder that initiates the knocking of conscience in the Macbeths; and it is his patriotic opposition to the usurper that galvanizes Scotland and England into a retributive force. Shakespeare's radical reconstruction of the chronicles, especially his amelioration of the victims' moral character, thus emphasizes the destruction of three primordial human bonds. This three-phase sequence of psychological disintegration (and implicit affirmation of the values destroyed) provides a paradigm of Shakespeare's mature tragic form.

I

In presenting an initial assault on regal or parental authority in Acts I-II, Macbeth is comparable to all the tragedies from Hamlet to Coriolanus. The murder of a parent-like king, reflecting the Macbeths' aspiration to God-like greatness and power, is an Oedipal repudiation of superego (as commentators since Freud and Jekels have acknowledged). Yet the gender implications of Duncan's rule have been too reductively construed by Oedipal-oriented psychoanalysts. For centuries it has been assumed that Duncan's fatherliness forms the basis of his comprehensive social identity (Scotland) and of his Christ-like spiritual identity (“The Lord's anointed temple,” II.iii.70)—that as patriarch he, like Lear and Cymbeline, represents the acme of psychological development, the mature conscience of the race, or in Freudian terms, “superego.” Critics persistently construe the regicidal motive as an Oedipal antagonism, citing Lady Macbeth's distress at Duncan's fatherly appearance during the assault (II.ii.12-13), to which one might add Macbeth's condemnation of the murder as a “parricide,” projecting his own Oedipal urges onto Malcolm and Donalbain (III.i.31).

Yet the Macbeths envision Duncan not just as a father (who “hath been / So clear in his great office,” I.vii.17-18), but also as a mother (who vies with Lady Macbeth in expressing love for her husband and for the other thanes, and who is cast as Lucrece to Macbeth's “ravishing Tarquin” with his phallic dagger). In addition, both Macbeths at critical moments in their soliloquies envision the monarch as a vulnerable and soul-like child (the heavenly infant which Lady Macbeth would deny the chance to “peep through the blanket of the dark, / To cry, ‘Hold, hold!’”); and which Macbeth projects apocalyptically as a “naked new-born babe” of Pity). Thus, in psychoanalytic (or “object relational”) terms Duncan is not just the father, but all aspects of the human family—perhaps most poignantly, mother and child. By their own gender obsessions, the Macbeths have promoted the erroneous and reductive conception of kingship as a pure patriarchy. As recent critics have noted, the Macbeths' urge for kingly greatness is expressed as a fantasy of becoming exclusively “manly” by taking up phallic weaponry to eliminate womanly and childlike characteristics.

The Macbeths' notable series of monologues in Acts I-II is fueled by willful hyperbole, which accommodates their male-oriented aspiration to “greatness” (a word whose variants appear 17 times in Act I, more than in the other four acts combined). To the extent that we as audience identify with the Macbeths' grand speechmaking, hypnotic role-playing, and cosmic aspiration for greatness in these acts, we must also experience the ironies that emerge in the actual performance of the murder: pettiness, furtiveness, cowardice, and utter deceit.
As the hyperbolic fantasy of these early soliloquies reveals, the type of ego functioning that informs this regicidal-parenticidal stage of Macbeth's career in villainy is sublimation but in its most perverted form. Anna Freud describes sublimation as the highest phase of psychic functioning in the construction of selfhood, the ultimate means of enriching the ego. Ideally, sublimation resolves the ongoing Oedipal struggle (a struggle for the final, genital stage of sexual maturation), not by evading bodily consummation of sexual energies, nor by suppressing the female aspect of those energies, but by promoting comprehensive and free interplay between gender-components of the self. Thus the Macbeths' brutish rape of kingly greatness works exactly contrary to authentic sublimation. By furtively killing the king they not only destroy the bond with this androgynous parent, but they also violate the illuminating and consolidating powers of their own superego or conscience, thus inducing a deeper regression into self-divisive and annihilative ego defenses.

II

The murder of Macbeth's “chiepest friend” in Act III is motivated not by further aspiration to greatness, but by rivalrous envy of a brotherly alter-ego. According to Aquinas, “After the sin of pride [whereby Lucifer aspired to be a deity] there followed the evil of envy … whereby he grieved over man's good.” Envy, and the rivalrous doubling and splitting which necessitates confronting distasteful mirror-images of the self at the center of each of the tragedies, is secondary to that earlier violent effort to displace divine-regal-parental authority. The regicide-parenticide thus leads to fratricide-amiticide, a chronologically secondary but equally universal phenomenon, which carries its own momentous psychological implications.

This assault on a warrior-friend who is virtually the mirror-image or double of Macbeth (“all hail, Macbeth and Banquo! / Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!” I.iii.68-69) is a direct violation of ego, involving a psychological “splitting” into self and shadow-self, as Macbeth perversely identifies with the darker, more illusory component. Though he rationalizes the murder of Banquo in only one soliloquy, far less grandiose than the monologues of Acts I-II, Macbeth throughout Act III continues the fiery expression of his inner powers by a number of intense dialogues in which he no longer effectively communicates his deeper meaning either to his auditors or to himself. They can only guess at the dark nuances in his spate of bestial images: serpents and scorpions (III.ii.13-5, 36; III.iv.28-30); bat, “shard-bound beetle,” and crow (III.ii.40-2, 50-3); “greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs” (III.i.92-4); “Russian bear, arm’d rhinoceros, or th’Hyrcan tiger” (III.iv.99-100); “magot-pies, and choughs, and rooks” (III.iv.121-4). If Acts I-II show a perverse mode of hyperbolic aspiration (appropriating sublimation as a means of overthrowing the superego or conscience), this furtive imagery of Act III shows Macbeth's regression to the prior psychic function of projection, the defensive externalization of his depraved and problematic qualities onto others, which enforces a general process of “decomposition” and “splitting” of the ego. At its best, projection (an expulsive psychic function deriving from the anal stage of infancy) plays a key role in the development of selfhood, enabling one to influence others by projecting onto them one's own ego ideals and inadequacies, and also enabling one thereby to experiment with and test those values and identities. But at its worst, as in malicious rituals of murder and scapegoating, projection revises reality so drastically that “nothing is, / But what is not,” and the murderer's own selfhood, his “single state of man,” is increasingly shaken and disjoined (I.iii.134-42).

Envy, and the resultant splitting of selfhood, dictates the entire sequence of Act III: Macbeth's spiteful soliloquy in which he feels “rebuked” by Banquo's “royalty of nature”; his strange ranking of dogs in the abusive hiring of the assassins, humiliating them, even as he claims to raise and “make love” to them; his furtive insecurity even with his wife (rehearsing her part while concealing his full intent); his “half-participation” in the murder itself, perhaps as the third murderer; and of course the self-division which builds to a climax during the banquet. Macbeth's schizoid vacillation between noblemen and assassins, between true and feigned selves, gradually gives way to a deeper vacillation between conscious and unconscious realities. His obscene praise of the missing guest (“And to our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss”) serves the psychic function of invoking his double's macabre presence, filling the central seat to which Macbeth himself is inexorably drawn.
Throughout Act III Macbeth's insecurity focuses no longer on the proud aspiration for kingly greatness, but on envious rivalry with his antithetical friend Banquo, who is to him what Edgar is to Edmund, Hal to Hotspur, Orlando to Oliver: the child favored with a loving heart, who thus calls into question the unloving self's entire “being” and must be utterly eliminated:

every minute of his being thrusts
Against my near’st of life: and though I could
With bare-faced power sweep him from my sight,
And bid my will avouch it, yet I must not,
For certain friends that are both his and mine,
Whose loves I may not drop.

(III.i.116-21)

Instinctively Macbeth envisions the bond with his “chiefest friend” in the context of a universal siblinghood, making the murder of Banquo as broadly symbolic as that of Duncan: first he eliminates the universal parent or greater-self, then the archetypal sibling or mirror-self. In each of the mature Shakespearian tragedies, this shattering confrontation with an antithetical self-image occurs at the play’s center, the middle of Act III: Othello’s temptation by Iago (III.iii), Lear’s discovery of “Poor Tom” (III.iv), Macbeth’s spectral encounter with Banquo (III.iv), Antony’s battle with Octavius (III.vii). As in Lear’s meeting with the mad beggar, Macbeth’s rencontre with his mutilated alter-ego engages him in full awareness of fraternal Otherness; but while this stunning encounter leads the kingly Lear instinctively to affirm the oneness of human souls, it provokes the usurper Macbeth to repudiate “that great bond” (III.ii.49).

In discarding Banquo, Macbeth thus divests himself of brother-love, the homoerotic bond, the second crucial cathexis forming the normative identity of the human psyche.

In Acts IV and V, focusing on the slaughter of a mother and children (and the immediate social and psychological consequences of that deed), Macbeth eliminates the third and most fundamental human bond, as he violates the primitive core of selfhood, what Freud called the id. Most critics treat this third assault as mere “fourth-act pathos,” as a dim echo of the previous kills, or as a hasty and illogical afterthought testifying to a kind of madness in the tyrant, since these victims offer neither militant opposition nor patrilineal threat to Macbeth’s royal claim.

But Macbeth’s essential motive for the third murder is not a reenactment of the Oedipal struggle (casting Macduff as the new parent-power to be deposed); nor is it another envious rivalry with a mirroring sibling (seeing Macduff’s goodness, like Banquo’s, as a galling comparison to his own evil). Rather, building upon and blossoming out of those two previous modes of aggression, Macbeth’s “black and deep desires” now enter a third and culminating phase: scornful annihilative hatred of the simple passional core, the mother-and-child matrix of selfhood—the healthy “oral-narcissist” bonding which contrasts the perverse narcissism now unfolding in Macbeth. Macbeth’s contemptuous repudiation and perversion of the affective-cognitive human core (the “id”) informs this final sequence of psychic degradation in Acts IV and V. The ego function which dominates this earliest phase of psychic development (and which most pertinently informs the final two acts of Shakespeare’s mature tragedies) is introjection, the ego’s incorporation of desired aspects of the nurturant other in order to construct its own identity. Introjection of the beloved, for the purpose of achieving (or re-achieving) total selfhood, is the psychological principle which is either violated or embraced in the final phase of each of Shakespeare’s major tragedies. Acts IV and V invariably draw their cathartic and transforming energy, not from the killing of a king, but from the heroic male’s reaction to the destruction of a beloved maiden (Ophelia, Desdemona, Cordelia) or, in the final tragedies, a mother with children (Lady Macduff and Lady Macbeth; Cleopatra; Virgilia and Volumnia).
A wholesome mode of introjective bonding informs the poignant scene of Lady Macduff and her son (IV.ii), where in the father's absence she frets over the child's continued sustenance. But the boy's affirmation that Providential if not parental care will feed him, echoing Matthew 6.26, suggests the dignity of what he has thus far introjected from his parents. This humane and spiritual nurture contrasts with the strikingly perverse mode of introjection in the preceding scene: the witches' materialistic, cannibalistic ritual. Into their womb-like cauldron's mouth (the *vagina dentata*) they fling fragments of poisonous and ravenous beasts (toad, snake, dragon, wolf, shark, tiger) and parts representing the erotic and sensory powers of non-Christians (Jew's liver, Turk's nose, Tartar's lips)—including those lower senses of smell and taste involved in feeding.

The final and focal object in the witches' catalog of dismembered parts is “Finger of birth-strangled babe, / Ditch-deliver'd by a drab” (IV.i.26-31). Thus, from the “pilot's thumb” of the witches' early scene (L.iii.28), symbolizing the perversion of parental guidance or superego,) Macbeth regresses inexorably to the aborted potency of the child (or id), as symbolized by the foetal “finger” or phallus, “strangled”-castrated-devoured by the cauldron-womb-mouth of the Voracious Mother, the “drab” or prostitute. Introjection (an incorporative mode of identification deriving from the experience of sucking and swallowing during the oral stage of infancy) is thus materialized and brutalized by the witches to secure worldly power.

From the vicious opening ritual of Act IV (which provokes the entire cycle of action in Acts IV-V), Macbeth embraces the witches' omnivorous perversion of the primal introjective principle. Each of his three murders has been associated with imagery of feasting, but it is particularly in his impulsive butchering of mother and babes that Macbeth has willingly and unhesitatingly “supp’d full with horrors” (V.v.13). Thus the third murderous assault, a Herod-like massacre of innocents from which Macbeth completely distances himself, but which Shakespeare exposes to the audience with the most excruciating intimacy, brings us to the peak of horror, the breaking of the deepest taboo, which violates the very rudiment of selfhood and of social bonding.

Far more than King Duncan and Banquo, whose entrammelment in political motivations partly cloaks their essential being, the intimacy of mother and child brings us closest to the core of human nature. In each of Shakespeare's mature tragedies, the final cathartic sequence of Acts IV-V jeopardizes the primal psychic ground of being, the inception of love: the drawing of woman, “fool,” or child into the web of deceit and violence promotes in the male authority-figures not merely revulsion against evil, but clear and intense awareness of the rich essence of life which has been lost. Macbeth himself, in his finest show of inner light, envisioned the soul's greatest power in its early innocence and in its affective mode of “pity”: “like a naked new-born babe, / Striding the blast” (I.vii.19-20). As he loses touch with that child-like and woman-nurtured essence in himself, Macbeth also loses his capacity for true kingship.

Notes


6. This “object relations” pattern was (in slightly different form) first noted by L. Veszy-Wagner, “Macbeth: ‘Fair is Foul and Foul is Fair,’” *American Imago* 25 (1968), 242-57. In her brief discussion of the pattern's implications, she subordinates each victim to a patriarchal version of the Oedipal struggle; but she acutely observes that Macbeth's “main problem is … uncertain identity” with regard to gender.


My interpretation of the structure of mature Shakespearean tragedy is as follows: Acts I-II, like Acts IV-V, each work as a cyclical unit, in which the latter act “answers” the former. In *King Lear*, e.g., the lengthy opening scene of Act I, in which Lear divests, humiliates, and exiles Cordelia, is answered by the lengthy concluding scene of Act II, in which Lear himself is, in precisely analogous manner, stripped, humiliated, and exiled—thus completing a cycle of worldly empowerment and divestiture. Acts IV and V of the play similarly work as a unit, the latter “answering” the former, but now enforcing a cycle of spiritual empowerment and divestiture. Act III is always a coherent unit in itself, its action revolving around a climactic central encounter which is the axis of the entire play.


11. Banquo's probity, even more than Duncan's, has been subjected to repeated questioning and qualification: see, e.g., A. C. Bradley, pp. 379-87; Roy Walker, *The Time Is Free* (London: Andrew Dakers, 1949), pp. 89 ff; Richard J. Jaarsma, “The Tragedy of Banquo,” *Literature and Psychology* 17 (1967), 87-94. Berger's and Calderwood's subtle criticism of Duncan's “aggressive giving” (n. 10) would similarly qualify Banquo's lavish praise of his warrior-colleague (I.iv.54-58). Yet that Duncan's and Banquo's compliments are benevolent is underscored not only by their repeated association with “royalty” and “grace,” but also by the contrast with Macbeth's deceitful, murderous mode of “aggressive giving”—especially his forceful invitation of Banquo to the feast (III.i.11-39) and flattery of the missing guest (III.ii.30-31, iv.41-44, 91-92). Though Shakespeare implies political shortcomings in Duncan's aged weakness and in Banquo's Hamlet-like inertia after the regicide (thus qualifying the playwright's compliment to James I), nevertheless in revising the chronicles Shakespeare has taken pains to idealize the moral character of both victims; their frailties, like Hamlet's, derive more from warring evils of the world than from their own innate urges.

12. Adelman and Hunter (n. 2) devalue Macduff's moral probity by taking seriously Lady Macduff's anxious but wittily-exaggerated accusations of her husband (IV.ii.6-14, 44-45); yet even the child appreciates the irony of her remarks. In spite of the pointed criticisms levelled at Macduff by his wife, by Malcolm (IV.iii.26-8), and, most emphatically, by himself (IV.iii.224-7), it is clear that he is moved by generous compassion for Scotland as a whole, and that his compassion grows out of the intense family feeling manifested by his wife and child.

On the Renaissance view of conscience or synthetesis as a means of consolidating mental powers and gender-components of human nature, see Pierre de la Primaudaye, *The French Academie* (London, 1618), Part 2, pp. 364-511, especially on restoring of the Edenic communion between heart's affective powers (pp. 437-511) and head's intellective powers (pp. 364-436).


17. Rivalrous envy becomes Macbeth's dominant motivation only during Act III, in the deliberations over murdering Banquo. In Acts I-II Macbeth's basic motivation is not envy, either for Duncan, Banquo, or Malcolm (though the basis for later envy is obviously established): in spite of anxiety at Duncan's appointing of his son as Prince of Cumberland, Macbeth never considers killing Malcolm along with Duncan (leaving the unappointed Donalbain to shoulder the guilt). In his initial embracing of evil Macbeth is preoccupied with the sublime fantasy of regicide as the “be-all and end-all,” conferring inviolable supremacy; only on discovering its failure to provide such aggrandizement does he turn to bitter envy of “fraternal” rivals.

18. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 2 vols., 1.63.2. Macbeth's rivalrous fury toward the fraternal Banquo is thus a second stage of evil, resulting from the failure to satisfy the hunger for greatness, just as Cain's envious fratricide stemmed from his parents' frustrated desire to emulate God. For a different perspective on the analogy between Cain and Macbeth, see Jorgensen, pp. 47-51, 190-5, 200, 213.


19. Jorgensen (p. 194) calls these speeches (like the similar ravings of Lear in Act III) “soliloquys made public.” Equally important, they are soliloquys made obscure through intense repression, so that neither Macbeth and Lear, nor their auditors, can easily fathom their speeches' profound


21. In spite of Macbeth's show of surprise at Fleance's survival (III.iv.20-24), it is tempting to believe that Macbeth is the “third murderer” [first advanced by Allan Park Paton, *Notes and Queries* (1869), and lucidly reformulated by Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1960), 2 vols., 2:122-6]—so that he only “half-participates” in the second murder. That Macbeth can hardly admit (even to himself) his involvement suggests the extent of his splitting psyche: for if he *is* the third murderer, it reveals both a deepening insecurity and a growing obsession with rational control (utter self-repression, anal attentiveness to detail, and a host of other defensive mechanisms aimed at sustaining to others and to himself the illusion of kingship, including the pretense of shock on learning of Fleance’s escape—which resembles his extravagant show of dismay on learning of Duncan’s death). Macbeth’s furtive pretense of uninvolvment even for his own cutthroats would thus demonstrate his increasing cowardice, alienation, and lack of a stable central self. Hence, for the second murder Macbeth both is and is not an active participant, owing to his descent into psychic bifurcation.

George Walton Williams, however, in “The Third Murderer in *Macbeth*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 23 (1972), 261, observes that “The supposition that Macbeth is the third murderer … necessitates a staging that twice violates the ‘Law of Reentry.’” Thus, though the third murderer clearly indicates Macbeth’s growing anxiety, and may vicariously represent his grasping for control (attending more closely to the usurper’s crucial purposes), stage convention would seem to argue against Macbeth’s schizoid reappearance as monarch-cutthroat-monarch in such rapid sequence. Yet if we consider the extraordinary liberties and experimentation in the staging of other Shakespearean plays of this period (e.g., the Dover cliff scene in *King Lear*), one wonders at the theatrical ingenuity of having Macbeth immediately reenter, perhaps with a dark cape only thinly disguising his kingly garments, so that the audience would actually be *aware* of his devious schizophrenic “doubling.” If so, it is the most stunningly purposeful violation of the Law of Reentry in the Shakespearean canon.

22. In “*Macbeth*: King James’s Play,” *South Atlantic Review* 47 (1982), 12-21, George Walton Williams astutely observes that the ghost of Banquo, rather than of Duncan, holds sway in the drama’s central scene, thus heightening the compliment to King James I, even though it subverts decorum. Williams (pp. 20-21, fn. 12) notes the symbolic suggestiveness of the seating which underlies the doppelgänger effect at the banquet: “Macbeth does not sit in his throne [the ‘state’ where Lady Macbeth remains]—to which he has no spiritual right; he does expect to sit at the table—a level to which he does have a right.” The “place reserved” for Banquo, to which Macbeth is drawn as to his own natural place, is centrally located: “Both sides are even: here I’ll sit i’ th’ midst” (III.iv.11). Almost exactly the same event occurs in Dostoyevsky's *The Double*, and similar psychic displacements occur in James' *The Turn of the Screw* and Conrad’s “The Secret Sharer”; but only Macbeth confronts a double who represents not his sinister shadow, but the ruination of his better self.

On literary uses of the "double" and the general process of "decomposition," see Doris L. Eder, "The Idea of the Double," Psychoanalytic Review 65 (1978), 579-614, esp. 587-9; and Robert Rogers, A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), including a provocative but misleading identification of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as doubles. Rogers does not distinguish between the homoerotic phenomenon of mirror-transference (between close friends, sibling rivals, or hero and alter-ego), and the more complex psychic transference between heterosexual partners, especially in marriage.

23. The positing of an "indissoluble tie" (Macbeth III.i.15-18) between self and shadow-self (or alter-ego) occurs at the exact center of Othello and Macbeth (and, with more benevolent implications, at the center of King Lear). At this moment each protagonist confronts the darkest possibilities of selfhood (the imputed treachery of Desdemona, the feigned sins of Poor Tom, the butchery inflicted by Macbeth himself).

24. See, e.g., Hogan (n. 2), who interprets the slaughter as a transference of the on-going Oedipal struggle, an indirect blow at Macduff as threatening authority and as fertile progenitor.

25. We must carefully distinguish Macbeth's tyrannous infantilism (culminating in narcissistic rage) from the healthy oral-narcissistic bond, involving mutual recognition and respect between parent and child during the sucking stage. For the potentially negative aspects of infantile narcissism, see S. Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," SE 14: 69-102; Otto F. Kernberg, Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism (New York: International Universities Press, 1975); and the important Shakespearean studies of aberrant narcissism by Kirsch, "Macbeth's Suicide," and Adelman, "Born of Woman" (n. 2), and "Anger's My Meat": Feeding, Dependency, and Aggression in Coriolanus, Representing Shakespeare, pp. 129-49. On the positive mode of narcissism and of maternal oral-narcissistic bonding, see Kohut, "Forms and Transformations of Narcissism," JAPA 14 (1966), 243-72; and Jessica Benjamin, The Bonds of Love (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), pp. 11-50. Shakespeare seems particularly attuned to this primitive cathexis which forms the core of human identity, emphasizing not just negative but positive aspects of motherly nurture in the cathartic sequence of each of his mature tragedies, most strikingly in Cleopatra's death-scene ("Dost thou not see the baby at my breast / That sucks the nurse asleep?)."


27. Though the cathartic valuation of womanly/matronly nurture in Acts IV-V holds true for all of Shakespeare's major tragedies, Hamlet requires qualification. Never fully reunited with Ophelia or Gertrude, Hamlet only incipiently comprehends the meaning of a grave holding his "fool" and his beloved. The play's final focus on the killing of a false parent-king, of an inadequate sibling-double
(Laertes), and of a disloyal nurturing mother, suggests unresolved Oedipal (and pre-Oedipal) anxieties and an incomplete quest for identity.


Note, however, that the demoniac symbolism in Macbeth IV.i is an alliance of male and female perversions: the witches' devouring cauldron (vagina dentata) is shortly joined by their demon masters' “armed head” (penis dentata) which similarly tempts Macbeth to annihilate children (IV.i.69-86). This satanic collusion of perverted gender components, a marital travesty which promotes mutual deception and annihilation rather than mutual support and procreation, evolves throughout the play.

This study is indebted to Professor Arthur Kirsch and the members of his 1988 NEH Seminar at the University of Virginia.

**Macbeth (Vol. 57): Further Reading**

**CRITICISM**


*Discusses Macbeth in the context of Jacobean politics.*


*Analyzes Macbeth in the context of Elizabethan and Jacobean cultures, including an overview of the play's major themes and action.*


*Explores the cultural conflict between patriarchy and the rule of mothers, as well as skepticism surrounding witchcraft as it is portrayed in Macbeth.*


*Focuses on the frequent use of the vocabulary of obstetrics and gynecology in the language used by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.*

Explores Shakespeare's treatment of the theme of time in Macbeth, tracing its origins in Renaissance myths, icons, and emblems.


Studies the role of the witches in Macbeth, exploring the difficulty in staging the play in the absence of theater conventions that were prevalent in Shakespeare's day.


Explores the theory that fear of assuming manhood is Macbeth's tragic flaw, leading him to annihilate all the potential and virtual father figures in the play.


Examines Macbeth as a morality play, with special focus on the use of supernatural elements and vice figures.


Explores the significance of the hand motif in Macbeth.

Richardson, Brian. “‘Hours Dreadful and Things Strange’: Inversions of Chronology and Causality in Macbeth.” *Philological Quarterly* 68, No. 3 (Summer 1989): 283-94.

Suggests that the inversions of chronology in Macbeth are designed to mirror the central concerns of the play and that Shakespeare uses time as an integral part of his narrative technique.


Discusses Shakespeare's tragic plays, and proposes that catharsis as clarification is the reader's main response to Shakespearean tragedies in Christian settings.


Sketches a three-dimensional map of Macbeth in a visceral, psychoanalytic, and phantasmagoric context.


Explores the topical nature of the action recreated in Macbeth, including references to such contemporary incidents as the Gunpowder Plot and other Jacobean political concerns.

**Macbeth (Vol. 69): Introduction**

*Macbeth*
Among Shakespeare's shortest and most visceral dramas, *Macbeth* was most likely written in 1606. Principally based on Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577), the play details the rapid and brutal rise of the warrior Macbeth to the throne of Scotland, followed by his subsequent intrigues, atrocities, and eventual demise on the field of battle. *Macbeth* has often been praised for its artistic coherence and the intense economy of its dramatic action, which is replete with vivid scenes of violence and treachery. Although many critics have remarked on the overwhelming violent action in the play, its nightmarish atmosphere, and the enigmatic nature of its hero, the drama has received almost universal acclaim as one of Shakespeare's most profound and mature visions of evil. Representing such a view, L. C. Knights (see Further Reading) evaluates the foul consequences of an unchecked “lust for power” in the drama, allowing Shakespeare to outwardly dramatize the internal distinctions between good and evil and the human potential to pervert moral order. Similarly, Richard S. Ide's (1975) structural analysis of the work highlights a dichotomy between the psychological tragedy of Macbeth and the symbolic interplay of good and evil in the drama, which Ide argues are integrated in the play's final act. Nicholas Brooke (1990) evaluates the rich poetic language and abundant interpretive signification in the play, elements that have been the primary interest of generations of critics.

Modern analyses of *Macbeth* have generally concentrated on its principal character—his struggles with his conscience and fate, his descent into corruption, and his ambivalent status as a tragic and sympathetic figure. Dolora G. Cunningham (1963) elucidates what is essentially an orthodox view of Macbeth as a pathologically ambitious individual who repudiates his humanity, and though confronted by remorse, ultimately acquiesces to a base desire for evil. Peter Ure (1974) takes a somewhat different approach, regarding *Macbeth* as less a study in villainy than a tragic and horrifying glance into the imagination of a man who, having murdered once only to be ravaged by guilt, resolves to think no more. In a complementary analysis of Macbeth's character, Lisa Low (1983) asks why audiences seem to identify with this violent murderer, arguing that Shakespeare's drama allows spectators to imaginatively enter the recesses of Macbeth's mind, to associate their feelings of guilt with his, and to find in his defeat the possibility for redemption. While Shakespeare's violent Thane of Glamis and short-lived King of Scotland continues to draw the vast majority of critical attention, to a much lesser degree twentieth-century commentators have also focused on Lady Macbeth. Representing what is generally viewed as a traditional estimation of the character, George William Gerwig (1929) interprets Lady Macbeth as a psychological portrait of unchecked, “feminine” ambition, projected toward the motivation and achievement of her husband.

Although *Macbeth* has enjoyed a long and storied stage history, the end of the twentieth century has witnessed a relative paucity in accomplished theatrical performances of the tragedy. Filling in this gap, many critics have turned their attention to the equally rich history of *Macbeth* as the subject of film, video, and television. Kenneth S. Rothwell (2000) examines the enduring appeal of Trevor Nunn's 1979 film production of the drama, occasioned by its digital rerecording at the end of the century. Praising Nunn's cinematically innovative direction and skilled evocation of the play's nightmarish dramatic and psychological landscape, Rothwell also admires the outstanding performances of Ian McKellen as an anguished Macbeth and Judi Dench as his manipulative wife. Arthur Lindley (2001) discusses the influential 1948 film version of *Macbeth* directed by Orson Welles. While former critics have generally decried the film as reductive and un-Shakespearean, Lindley instead concentrates on its ahistorical evocation of medieval Europe, and its lasting impact on subsequent cinematic interpretations of the epoch. Considering other filmed productions of *Macbeth*, David G. Hale (2001) observes that even as numerous critics have asserted that the drama suggests a harmonious ending in the downfall of its protagonist, a number of BBC television and feature film productions of the tragedy have tended to imply a continued state of historical instability that persists long after Macbeth's defeat.

Late twentieth-century interpretation of *Macbeth* has continued the process of studying the complex thematic nuances of this tragedy, particularly in its combined and potentially apocalyptic treatment of evil, violence, and sexuality. Sheldon P. Zitner (1964) comments on the generic status of *Macbeth* as a work that, despite its
depiction of the extremes of human wickedness, remains a tragic narrative rather than a melodramatic representation of evil. R. A. Foakes (1982) offers a complementary view, regarding the drama as an intricate exploration of ambition and its tragic consequences, while highlighting its evocative imagery of death. Displacing the thematic concentration on ambition, Bert O. States (1985) looks to Macbeth’s so-called ‘pity’ soliloquy in Act I, scene vii, to uncover the apocalyptic implications of the drama. Violent contradiction and disguised evil lie at the center of Franco Ferrucci’s (1980) estimation of Macbeth. Presenting an unorthodox reading, Ferrucci contends that Macduff, who is generally seen as the embodiment of virtue and justice that balances Macbeth's sinful ambition, is just as despicable as his rival. In true Machiavellian fashion, Macduff plays at being good more convincingly than the usurping Scottish king, according to Ferrucci. The link between violence, debased sexuality, and the supernatural is the focus of Dennis Biggins's 1976 analysis, illuminating the process by which these motifs, personified in the Weird Sisters, drive the action of Macbeth. Margaret Omberg's (1996) psychological study revisits the perennial question, asked flippantly by L. C. Knights decades earlier: “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?” Taking the inquiry seriously, Omberg maintains that Macbeth's failure to produce an heir is psychologically and thematically fundamental to the tragedy. Turning to the religious and philosophical implications of Macbeth, Jan H. Blits (1996) studies the drama's concern with the limits of virtue and the violation of human and natural order.

**Criticism: Overviews And General Studies: Richard S. Ide (essay date 1975)**


*[In the following essay, Ide observes the seemingly divided structure of Macbeth as both the psychological tragedy of Macbeth and a symbolic/cosmological tragicomedy of good and evil—two perspectives that intersect in Duncan's murder and are integrated in Act V of the drama.]*

Certainly one of the most difficult problems facing the critic of Macbeth is its bipartite structure. The play appears to be two plays. The striking change in tone and perspective at the structural seam shifts emphasis away from the psychological tragedy to a symbolic pattern of retribution; the personal tragedy of crime and punishment is assimilated into a broader pattern of death and regeneration. For three acts the audience has thought with Macbeth and looked at the world largely through his eyes; but now at the end, when his heart is hardened and initial engagement is turned to detachment, the audience must readjust to a counter-movement of light, hope, and grace. The play progressively opens upon a cosmic panorama. Heaven, virtue, and divine kingship return to Scotland, and those who once looked with Macbeth are asked to look at him, to judge the murderer from an enormous distance, from God's eye, as it were, who so clearly directs the forces of restoration.

These radically disjunctive points of view, the perspective from inside the hero's psyche and the godlike ken from afar, can be isolated most clearly on either side of the play's structural divide; but in reality, as I will argue, they have been contemporaneous perspectives throughout. From the beginning Shakespeare's “daring poetry” and scenic technique create the illusion of a double stage for Macbeth's tragedy. The double perspective from which the audience is initially asked to view the play casts a discomforting ambiguity over the dramatic action, a fair and foul confusion that will be rewarded later when the psychological tragedy (the theater of the mind) and the symbolic tragicomedy (the world stage), the two perspectives and the two structural movements, are superimposed at the regicide and finally placed in clear focus in the restoration battle of act V.
The witches who open the tragedy must be taken to some extent as its progenitors. They stand far removed from the current battle and look ahead to a future meeting with Macbeth as if they knew the outcome of the present and commanded the future. But while their relationship to the world stage conveys this vague sense of determinism, their immediate effect is to evoke wonder and puzzlement: who are they and what is happening? The remarks are strangely cerebral, both colorless and paradoxical: “lost and won,” “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (I.i.4,11).² The large paradox will “hover” over the entire play, but for the moment the audience can see nothing through the “fog and filthy air”; the battle, the sunset, and the name Macbeth are absorbed into the hurlyburly of a metaphysical realm symbolized by the storm, the blank stage, and the ministers of verbal paradox. In effect, the witches place the audience at their own equivocal distance from the world stage and heighten anticipation that the future will bring clarity to the chaos.

It is the more disturbing, therefore, that the sergeant's grotesque exposition provides little relief from doubt and uncertainty.³ His bloody images are confounded in a surrealistic haze (“broil,” “doubtful,” “choke,” “multiplying villainies,” “smoked,” etc.), producing a visual equivocation to stand beside the verbal paradox of the story overture. From the witches' distance the battle is ambiguous, both lost and won, both foul and fair; so, too, the sergeant's distant overview compares the armies to “two spent swimmers” moving indistinguishably in a sea of blood. The superimposition of perspectives here and in the remainder of the passage (I.ii.7-23) is striking and noteworthy. This initial overview superimposes on the ant-like “broil” the outlines of two gigantic swimmers. The poetry then tends to equate one swimmer with Macdonwald, but his gigantic outline soon dissolves into a swarm of humanity, into tiny creatures struggling successfully under Fortune's equivocal smile. At first glance the second swimmer is buried under the swarming armies. “Disdaining” the deity looming over the world stage, with enormous courage and great effort a diminutive Macbeth hacks his way into the forefront of our imaginations. The poetry zooms in on the flashing sword carving a passage through the massed armies; and when Macbeth himself finally does emerge from the “broil,” the shift in physical perspective has enlarged him to gigantic proportions, creating a startling and appallingly vivid closeup for his conclusive victory: “Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops, / And fix'd his head upon our battlements” (I.ii.22-23).

Once again, however, Macbeth's “fair,” if terrifying, victory is cast into doubt by a return to a wider temporal and spatial perspective:

As whence the sun 'gins his reflection,  
Shipwracking storms and direful thunders break,  
So from that spring, whence comfort seem'd to come,  
Discomfort swells.  

(I.ii.25-28)

For a moment the sergeant becomes both commentator and visionary, stepping back from the close-up experience of Macbeth's victory to relate his “fair is foul” sententia with prophetic authority (“Mark, King of Scotland, mark”). The conclusive action, the “fair” victory, fades into the ambiguous fog of a distanced point of view.

The second half of the sergeant's narrative diminishes (rather than enlarges) the hero through a similar manipulation of perspective. The audience imaginatively focuses on the two figures of Macbeth and Banquo setting out to meet the Norwegian threat as “canons overcharg'd with double cracks”:

Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds,  
Or memorize another Golgotha,  
I cannot tell—  
But I am faint, my gashes cry for help.
Perspective and meaning are blurred as if in the smoke of the cannons. Here one visualizes human figures ready to bathe, yet the water becomes blood and the cleansing stream a reeking wound. The perspective shrinks Macbeth and Banquo (they are bathing ... in a wound), and the entire concept is short-circuited (to wash clean ... in blood). “Or memorize another Golgotha” complicates the conceptual distortion. The context of the blood-bath becomes a ritual cleansing in that the blood from Christ's wounds on Golgotha was redemptive; at the same time, however, Macbeth and Banquo are the agents of execution. Lustral sacrifice or bloody slaughter? fair or foul? win or lose? The bloody sergeant cannot tell and neither can the audience. Like the voice crying out from the sergeant's gashes, the hero is once again swimming in a sea of blood. He has been distanced by a shift in physical perspective and, once again, his actions have become ambiguous.

Although it would be unwise to pin much significance on a fairly subtle analysis such as this, it seems clear at the very least that Shakespeare's conscious artistic strategy places an enormous burden on his audience. It is difficult and discomforting to maintain a double perspective, to have figure and ground, close-ups and vistas, in liquid dissolution. One final example may help to establish the rationale behind the dramatic strategy:

Sleep shall neither night nor day  
Hang upon his penthouse lid;  
He shall live a man forbid.  
Weary sev'n-nights nine times nine,  
Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine:  
Though his bark cannot be lost,  
Yet it shall be tempest-tost.

This preview of Macbeth's curse merges a natural hurlyburly with a psychological hurlyburly. Like the gigantic warrior emerging from the swarm of humanity or the little creature swamped in another's wound, the conjunction of the eyelid and the penthouse roof conveys a sense of double perspective and double identity. On the one hand, the witches curse the man inside the penthouse and toss the sailor in his boat; the supernatural creatures assert control over the sleepless or storm-tossed creature on the world stage. But on the other hand, we simultaneously glimpse the diminutive figure inside the eyelid and the little man inside the body-bark who is tossed by a psychological tempest. From one perspective the man peaks and pines under the witches' curse; from another, he is the captive of his own psychological nightmare.4

Here, I think, we have come to the central point. From a panoramic perspective the audience recognizes the existence of a supernatural playwright who oversees the storm and battle and conceives the play's large ironies: the ambiguous fight of Macbeth and Cawdor, Macbeth's entrance at Duncan's ironic cue (I.iv.11-13), the decision of the king to spend the night at Inverness, and many more. The cosmic playwright is initially associated with the witches and their diabolical “charm” which appears to predict events with unfailing accuracy and to control Macbeth's actions and responses: “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (I.iii.38). And yet, a second perspective also recognizes a little creature on a second stage which we will soon come to associate with the inner theater of Macbeth's psyche. For Macbeth is also the playwright of his own tragedy, one whom we must assume anticipates the witches' prophecy (I.iii.51-52), whose “foul and fair” perhaps demonstrates a psychological affinity with the diabolical forces, and if Banquo's warning is heeded (I.iii.122-26), whose will is open to the solicitations of the witches.5

Both Macbeths, the actor on the world stage and the playwright of his own psychological theater, are present in his first significant aside:
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme. ...

But although Macbeth confidently places himself in the witches' drama, his visual imagination anticipates the “swelling act” by translating it into a “horrid image,” thus casting a fearful ambivalence over his role:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good:—
If ill, why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor:
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man,
That function is smother'd in surmise,
And nothing is, but what is not.

(I.iii.127-42)

The witches' stormy overture and the sergeant's bloody turmoil, both the verbal and the visual equivocation, have prepared the audience to enter into Macbeth's psychic chaos. One startling, bloody image flashes across Macbeth's psychological fog with such intensity that the frightful thought cannot be articulated. The witches' prophecy in the stormy chaos of scene iii may have set the tragedy in motion, but Macbeth's aside placed against the scenic backdrop reveals a second creation from chaos. For a moment the drama controlled by chance and the witches “yields” to Macbeth's imaginative dramatization of the imperial theme. And ultimately, although “chance” will prepare the stage, Macbeth as dramatist will bring the “horrid image” to realization.

In Macbeth's extraordinary aside he creates a picture of the future so powerful that present thought is absorbed into the horrible imagining. Macbeth's imaginative “rapture,” however, does more than relocate reality in the psychological world (“And nothing is, but what is not”); it tends to transform present things into future visions, to interpret present images as symbols of future consequences. Later, for example, the real dagger will gravitate towards the imaginary dagger his imagination has already bloodied, as if the present moment were dictated by the future vision; at the same time, Macbeth will dress himself in the murderer's role and in a state of trance, as if following a visual script, will stride off stage to fulfill his “horrid image.” At the moment of the murder, in other words, function will no longer be “smother'd in surmise”; it will rather be an instrument under the imagination's command.

The more immediate point, however, is that Shakespeare's tragic hero exhibits a genius for symbolism. His visual imagination is capable of superimposing picture upon picture to an extent that it becomes impossible for him to delineate present from future, perspective from perspective. This is why I think Helen Gardner is ill-advised in limiting the context of those striking passages in act I, scene vii, passages which have been tirelessly explicated but to which I must again return:

Besides, this Duncan

Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off.

(I.vii.16-20)
Despite an earlier logic and syntax of cool objectivity and despite explicit protestations to the contrary, Macbeth's fear of heavenly retribution is so powerful that it swells up from the subconscious to smother the virtues' plea against the regicide: “Duncan's virtues pleading at an earthly tribunal, because of their strength of innocence, are like angels (both innocent and strong), angels who shall herald a heavenly tribunal which shall damn Macbeth for Duncan's murder.” One image triggers a second, the second a third, each succeeding image superimposed on the former, until the original vision has been transformed into a charged symbol containing at once present thought and future imaginings, fear of earthly judgment and fear of heavenly judgment.

And Pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's Cherubins, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.

(I.vii.21-25)

The imaginative process in this passage is similar, yet the visual leap from the weak “new-born babe” to the powerful figure “striding the blast” is elliptical. The babe of pity seems to trigger once again the forensic power of innocence and virtue which in turn recalls the powerful angels with their trumpets of judgment. Hence, the vision of a Christ-like child, at once pitiful victim and powerful judge, the naked babe who will stride the blast, flashes across Macbeth's mind: “He rode vpon the Cherubyns and did flye: / he came flyenge with the winges of the wynde” (Psalms 18:10).

The fearful images of earthly and apocalyptic retribution spring from Macbeth's imaginative contemplation of Duncan's murder (“Besides, this Duncan ...”). It is ironical that these psychological prohibitions against the regicide are precisely what define Macbeth's slaughter of innocence. In Macbeth's imagination Duncan is a charged symbol; but it is not until the discovery scene, when Shakespeare allows Macduff choric stature, that the full dimensions of the “horrid image” are presented in symbolic stasis. At this crucial moment in the play Macduff sees more and infers more than he could possibly know in propria persona; what he reads out of the murder are the symbolic perspectives Macbeth had read into the murder.

MACD.

O horror! horror! horror!
Tongue nor heart cannot conceive, nor name thee!

MACB., Len.

What's the matter?

MACD.

Confusion now hath made his masterpiece!

Most sacrilegious Murther hath broke ope

The Lord's anointed Temple, and stole thence

The life o'th' building!

MACB.

What is't you say? the life?
LEN.

Mean you his Majesty?

MACD.

Approach the chamber, and destroy your sight

With a new Gorgon.—Do not bid me speak:

See, and then speak yourselves.—

Exeunt Macbeth and Lenox.

Ring the alarum-bell.—Murther, and treason!

Banquo, and Donalbain! Malcolm, awake!

Shake off this downy sleep, death's counterfeit,

And look on death itself!—up, up, and see

The great doom's image!—Malcolm! Banquo!

As from your graves rise up, and walk like sprites,

To countenance this horror!

Enter Lady Macbeth

LADY M.

What's the business,

That such a hideous trumpet calls to parley

The sleepers of the house? speak, speak!

(II.iii.64-83)

As the visual emphasis of the passage makes clear, the murder scene is a picture, terrifying in itself and terrifying for the symbolic perspectives Macduff sees in it. Like the visual tyranny of Macbeth's “horrid image,” sight delivers meanings that cannot be conceived or named. And yet, of course, Macduff's choric pronouncement does conceive and name the regicide and in the process allows the audience full imaginative freedom to visualize what it could only glimpse through vague and shifting perspectives from the moment of its inception in Macbeth's mind to its bloody execution in the previous scene.8 Macduff's passage, then, is pivotal not only to our understanding of the symbolic perspectives of Duncan's murder but to our understanding of the larger structural relationship between the world stage and the theater of the mind. It is with Macduff's discovery passage as backdrop that I would like now to discuss the symbolic characterization of Duncan and the double perspective which views Macbeth as actor on one stage and playwright of a second stage.
Shakespeare has created an expansive and suggestive context for the dramatization of Duncan's kingship. In act I, scene iv, Duncan appears as a liege lord who is quick to reward the faithful service of his vassals, as a paternal figure who accepts the duties of his “children and servants” and folds them to his heart, and as a sovereign planter who nourishes his servants in love and banquets on the harvest of their service. When Duncan next appears in scene vi, he radiates an aura of innocence and benign propriety which is enhanced by the imagery of the “holy supernatural.” But just prior to his arrival at Inverness, however, Lady Macbeth had uttered a black invocation, praying that the “murth’ring ministers” unsex her and frustrate her natural instincts that she might forward the murder plot. The dark context creates a pointed irony for the king's advent. The lyric song of fertility, bounty, and natural grace which began the scene is meant to celebrate the arrival of the innocent victim.

In this context, then, Lady Macbeth confronts Duncan with outrageous deceit and mock homage. Her husband had made his formal account of stewardship earlier (I.iv); now Lady Macbeth returns to the master-servant, liege lord-vassal relationship:

\[
\text{In every point twice done, and then done double,} \\
\text{Were poor and single business, to contend} \\
\text{Against those honours deep and broad, wherewith} \\
\text{Your Majesty loads our house: for those of old,} \\
\text{And the late dignities heap'd up to them,} \\
\text{We rest your hermits. ...}
\]

(I.vi.14-28)

This impersonal, formulaic language which troubled Coleridge has suggestive overtones. Lady Macbeth is unworthy that her Lord come under her roof. The harvest imagery—“loads our house,” “heap’d up to them”—recalls the shower of blessings the sovereign planter bestows on his servants, while the language of accounting—“twice done,” “compt,” “audit”—evokes the theme of “The Parable of the Talents” (Matt. 25:14-30). Indeed, when considered together with the formulaic language and gesture of homage to the liege lord, the allusive echo suggests a kind of mock offertory. Two themes stressed repeatedly in Offertory Verses were: 1) man's absolute dependence on the Sovereign, and 2) man's duty to make a just accounting of God's blessings:

… all that is in the heavens and in the earth is thine. … Both riches and honor come from thee and thou rulest over all.

(1 Chron. 29)

Everyman shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God which he has given you.

(Deut. 16:16)
suggestion of the final harvest and final audit in Lady Macbeth's language. Additionally, the paradox implicit in offering the liege lord what is already his parallels precisely the paradox of the Christian sacrifice. For example, at the prayer of Oblation following the Communion, we offer the Victim to Himself, and at the same time we beseech the Liege Lord to accept “this our bounden dutie and service.” And later in the prayer we ask God to respond to our offering by filling us with grace and heavenly benedictions. Duncan had accepted Macbeth's homage earlier; his language at the close of this scene reiterates his acceptance and suggests its sacramental meaning: “We shall continue our graces towards him” (I.vi.30). The innocent Duncan has been deceived by the mock homage and unwittingly begins to carry out his role as sacrificial victim. He accepts the offering of himself.

At Duncan's exit Shakespeare moves immediately to the supper setting and to Macbeth's soliloquy “If it were done, when 'tis done.” The sacramental implications of scene vi, of course, make more compelling the tentative associations of the royal banquet with the Last-Supper and of Macbeth with the betrayer. The stage has been set for Macbeth's foul deed. Chance has provided the opportunity, Lady Macbeth the spur, and the cosmic playwright associated initially with the diabolical witches has woven into the luminous dramatization of Duncan's ideal kingship a black counter-order of unnatural murder, treacherous deceit, and sacramental blasphemy. But it remains for Macbeth to poison the chalice. Ironically, his psychological prohibitions against the regicide have worked hand-in-glove with the cosmic playwright's dramatization of order and counter-order; while they have testified to Duncan's innocence and virtue, they have also helped to define the awful proportions of the crime. Nevertheless, if Macbeth is to play the role in the witches' “imperial theme,” he must dupe his conscience and his will, those prohibitive powers which warn that he is about to enter a “drama of chaos.” This he does, and it is important to note that he carries out the self-deception by creating his own equivocal stage in the psychological theater of the mind.

In the moments before the murder (II.i), Banquo has palled the time with frightful dreams and psychological burdens. Still, he has kept his allegiance free and fought off the sympathy with evil which seems a property of the night and the witching hour. Macbeth, however, has blotted his allegiance. At the telling moment he wishes to be alone with his thoughts: “Go, bid thy mistress, when my drink is ready, / She strike upon the bell” (II.i.31-32). The murder weapon appears to Macbeth in vision, and his imagination soon dresses the dagger in its bloody role. Macbeth himself appears drawn to the future vision, as if it dictated present activity (“Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going”). And yet, before he can go, he seems compelled to shroud the instrument, the moment, and the approaching deed in a beautiful prayer to darkness and evil:

Now o'er the one
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep: Witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's off'rings; and wither'd Murther,
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost.

(II.i.49-56)

Macbeth attempts to purge deep-seated misgivings about the murder by transmuting them into the solemnity of a black liturgy and attempts to free himself for the deed by identifying with the “murdering creature” of the surrealistic world of night. In his present state of rapture, he makes the “horrid image” more palatable to his prohibitive conscience by wrapping the deed in a ceremonial liturgy and dressing himself as celebrant. Through an extraordinary act of self-incantation (at the same time a self-equivocation), Macbeth becomes a ghastly priest awaiting the signal which will call him to the sacrificial chamber. The Communion bell rings, and Macbeth draws near to his “drink”: “I go, and it is done”—consummatum est. “The bell invites me”—the
Invitation was a formal prayer in the liturgy prior to the Communion: “Drawe nere and take this holy Sacrament to youre comfort.”

At the moment of the murder, Malcolm and Donalbain wake from their bad dream to utter a strange benediction (“God bless us”) and soon after occurs a parodic Ablution, the washing of hands after the sacrifice: “Go, get some water, / And wash this filthy witness from your hand” (II.ii.45-46). Finally, the knocking at the gate acquires a similar significance in this symbolic pattern of sacrifice. Many critics have paralleled the scene to the dramatic set-piece of the Mystery Play tradition, the Harrowing of Hell, which took place after Christ's death and before his Resurrection.

Macbeth had assumed at the crucial moment a self-created role in the theater of the mind, one which was absolutely congruent to his role on the world stage as minister of the witches' black counter-order. His parodic sacrifice fulfills the pattern of black ritual the larger drama had established and undoes the sacramental relationship between God and King, God and Scotland. Duncan's bloodletting has loosed a graceless and godless reign of sin, tyranny, and death on Scotland. The regicide has been a “sacrilegious Murther” indeed, a Black Communion with Macbeth as High Priest.

Shakespeare's symbolic overlay becomes clearer, I think, when one considers some of the supporting emphases in the tragedy: on blood and slaughter, for example, and on the numerous perversions of eating and drinking. These vivid and insistent images serve as a naturalistic chorus for Macbeth's crude sacrilege, the bloody perversion of the Lord's Supper. After the regicide the concepts of feasting and slaughter are inseparable. Macbeth invites Banquo to a state dinner, but the invitation is a front for his murderous designs; later, the appearance of the cutthroats and the gruesome vocabulary of murder comment upon the “feast” as pointedly as the bloody ghost comments upon the banquet table. The Scottish Lord who wishes to “free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives” (III.vi.36)—recalling the murders of both Duncan and Banquo—unites feasting and slaughter as surely as Macbeth himself does: “I have supp'd full with horrors” (V.v.13). Finally, all these metaphoric emphases seem drawn together in a restatement of theme by the witches' “hell-broth,” the “charm” made of flesh and blood and concocted in accordance with an infernal liturgy, the source of those deceitful visions which promise Macbeth life and bring him death.

Macduff's description of the bloody chamber, however, reveals more than the “sacriligious Murther.” To approach the other symbolic perspectives of the regicide it will be necessary to return to the moments after the murder when Macbeth's blasphemy releases a psychic wave of heavenly retribution. His earlier fears had anticipated the consequences, and as he did in his earlier poetry, Macbeth now reads damnation into the images of the present moment. This psychological retribution he cannot “jump.” The self-accusation surfaces immediately. “God bless us” was a charm against sorcery and witchcraft, a prophylactic against evil thoughts, and, more specifically, an invocation for protection against the devil. Macbeth, however, has been the minister of those diabolical forces. When the voices from the second chamber break through his trance, Macbeth is left naked, deserted by his role. Guilt seizes him and “Amen” sticks in his throat. The yearning for a former innocence is asserted in that lyric voice of accusation (“Macbeth doth murther Sleep”) which signals that conscience has awakened to judge the self-deceived dramatist, to flood his mind with guilt and fear, and to transmute the washing of hands into a terrifying vision of judgment: “No, this my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine” (II.ii.60-61). The murder has been a spiritual suicide; Macbeth has drunk judgment upon himself: “… bewayle your sinnes, and come not to thys holy Table; lest after takying of that holy Sacrament, the Devill entre into you as he entred into Judas, and fill you ful of al iniquities, and bring you to destruccion, both of bodye and soule.” In poisoning the chalice Macbeth has betrayed his former innocence and prohibitive conscience, that better part of himself, which he had dressed as celebrant in the liturgical theater of the mind.

Now that Macbeth's reawakened conscience enables him to judge his actions from a distance, the self-doubts and self-recriminations knock at his ribs as fearfully and as forcefully as the knocking at the gate. While
Macbeth drifts further into painful introspection, the dramatic symbol of his guilt, the booming knacks, become more insistent. He sees clearly the ugly sacrilege behind the liturgical charade, and he cannot face the damned, terrifying creature who from center-stage in the theater of the mind mocks the self-deceived dramatist. The spiritual damnation is acknowledged, and in another state of rapture Macbeth gazes upon the hell within. The porter scene, perhaps Shakespeare's most sophisticated and brilliant dramatic inset, allows the audience a glimpse of that horrible psychological stage. When Macbeth exits, lost in himself, the porter of hell-gate stumbles before us to play out the murderer's psycho-drama.

“Who's there?”—precisely what Macbeth asks of himself. And as the petty citizens pass in review—the farmer-suicide who betrays himself while expecting too much, the equivocator whom heaven has damned, the dwarfish thief who has stolen clothes—the answer is insistent: Macbeth is there, the several faces of the damned murderer are there. Macbeth's little “castle” is under siege, and the drunken porter, the Vice-like impresario himself, reflects obliquely on the wretched master within. At the knocking at the gate, the porter wakes from a drunken stupor with hell and damnation on his mind, a dramatic counterpoint to Macbeth's own experience after the crime. The “base carousing till the second cock,” the urine, and the vomit—all perverted forms of nourishment—supply an ugly, naturalistic commentary on Macbeth's activity during those same hours. From one perspective, in other words, the knocking at the gate and the porter scene announce the arrival of the retributive forces who will eventually pay Macbeth in kind for his crime; but from a second, superimposed perspective, we see on stage a hellish dramatization of Macbeth's psychological theater.

This abrupt shift from sacrilege to judgment in the murder scene is reemphasized by Macduff's shift from the “sacrilegious Murther” to the explicit imagery of Doomsday at the discovery:

Banquo and Donalbain! Malcolm, awake!  
Shake off this downy sleep, death's counterfeit,  
And look on death itself!—up, up, and see  
The great doom's image!—Malcolm! Banquo!  
As from your graves rise up, and walk like sprites,  
To countenance this horror!  

(II.iii.76-81)

The metaphors begin a process of equation relating a daily sleep with an eternal sleep, the bed with the grave. Following the apocalyptic portents Lennox had described (II.iii.55-62), the imaginative vision of waking from the grave prepares for the double reference of Lady Macbeth's trumpet:

What's the business,  
That such a hideous trumpet calls to parley  
The sleepers of the house?  

(II.iii.81-83)

The primary image conveys a call to a conference of war, and this is the first assembly of the retributive forces. But a heavenly trumpet is superimposed on the military symbol. While the trumpet anticipates the restoration in historical time, it also prefigures a heavenly retribution at the final audit. This apocalyptic “trumpet” is reinforced by the hurlyburly on stage: Lady Macbeth is the first to “wake” from her sleep, to rise up from her grave at Macduff's command, and join the chaotic assembly of judgment.

The “trumpet,” of course, is psychic. Lady Macbeth wakes psychologically to the alarum bell with hell and damnation on her mind. She has shared her husband's “drink,” which for her as for Macbeth and the porter who reflects upon him will become the cup of staggering, “the cup of the wine of wrath.” Though Lady Macbeth is play-acting here, the psychological validity of the moment will become clear in the sleepwalking
scene of Act V. She is eventually shut up in a psychic world of torment, and like her husband's "torture of the mind" and "restless ecstasy" (III.ii.21-22), her tortured sleep here on this "bank and shoal of time" prefigures her eternal sleep: "Hell is murky" (V.i.35).

But more important for our purposes, the "trumpet" inevitably recalls the imaginative power which translated virtues pleading at an earthly tribunal into "angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against / The deep damnation of his taking-off." Macbeth's psychological damnation had been evident in the moments following the murder; later, he bluntly acknowledges the consequences of the regicide:

For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murther'd;
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace,
Only for them; and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common Enemy of man ...

(III.i.64-68)

He is assured of damnation. What rankles him, however, is that he has not solidified his hold on the kingship. Banquo and his royal lineage threaten Macbeth's lease on life and on the crown (III.i.47-71). They represent the earthly retribution Macbeth had feared, and for this reason he falls to pieces at the sight of Banquo's fearful resurrection:

That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end; but now, they rise again,
With twenty mortal murthers on their crowns,
And push us from our stools.

(III.iv.77-81)

As might be expected, Macbeth's excited imagination reads the ghost symbolically: Banquo, "crowned" with murders, rises in revenge as symbol of the lineage which will unseat Macbeth.

Nevertheless, Macbeth's fear and guilt seem to stick deeper than this. The ghost symbolizes more than its royal offspring. Macbeth refers repeatedly to Banquo's fearful resurrection from the grave (III.iv.70-72, 78-82, 92), for the ghost represents the proof and embodiment of the life-after-death which Macbeth is so anxious to deny (III.iv.69, 92-94, 105-06). In fact, in the tragic hero's psyche, Banquo came first as a figure of accusation at a tribunal of judgment: "Thou can't not say, I did it: never shake / Thy gory locks at me" (III.iv.49-50). The resurrection from the grave and the silent accusations, as much as the threat of earthly retribution, throw Macbeth into a psychic hurlyburly. The discord imaged in the theater of the mind is projected on stage, translating the facade of nourishment, concord, and social order into another prefigurement of the chaotic assembly of judgment.

Macbeth's self-estimation had suffered a terrifying diminution after the regicide; he had since played out the hoax of the dwarfish thief and despicable murderer with the assurance that the witches had destined him to become king and with the assumption that he would remain king through his natural lifetime. As in the case of Duncan's murder, however, the dramatist's initiative in killing Banquo has flooded the psychological theater with fear and guilt. And what is perhaps worse, he has been "unmanned" by the presence of Banquo, miraculously risen from the dead by a supernatural power Macbeth can neither understand nor outface. After the banquet, therefore, Macbeth is forced into two decisions. The decision to cross the river of blood betrays the utter desperation of a damned and tormented soul who must either drown his conscience or forever remain its hostage. The decision to learn the worst from the witches betrays Macbeth's utter helplessness on a stage directed by supernatural powers beyond his control. The dramatist's attempts to determine the future had twice
led to self-betrayal; he now must annihilate that psychological theater and place all in the witches' hands. In the final acts of the play Macbeth emerges on the cosmic stage as a stereotypical villain, every inch the ranting tyrant of a drama he blindly hopes or desperately believes the witches have written.

III

At the discovery of Duncan's murder, Macduff's vivid images articulate the horror of the crime and prefigure the inevitable judgment. Macduff has been a prophet of doom for both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Her bloody and hellish role in the witches' drama is ultimately introverted into the private theater of a distraught psyche; the sleepwalking scene dramatizes her fearful damnation. Macbeth's damnation runs counter to hers. The initial mental curse is ultimately projected into the world; he becomes the creature his psyche has created, a damned satanic tyrant reigning over the hell on earth. As I suggested at the outset, however, there is a wider perspective by which to judge Macduff's description of the “horrid image.” For the counter-movement of the play, the pattern of Christian tragicomedy, Macduff's announcement bears good tidings. He has come to wake the king; we hear him cry out “Awake, awake,” and there shall be an awakening. Shakespeare has patterned the counter-movement of the play on the resurrection promise of the Easter liturgy and on the concept of Duncan's anointed kingship. Before proceeding into an admittedly speculative portion of the essay, it would be helpful to recall that Macbeth was in many respects a royal play and that as nearly as it can be dated it was composed in February-March-April of 1606. With this in mind, we return again to Duncan's symbolic portrayal.

Duncan was the “anointed” king, he was the christus of the Lord. Richard II indicates that Shakespeare knew the king's role was in imitation of Christ. James I, of course, also knew it. In an address to the First Parliament in 1603, James makes explicit use of Christological language and analogy: “I am the Husband, and the whole Isle is my lawfull Wife; I am the Head and it is my Body; I am the Shepherd, and it is my flocke.” The allusions are to Christ as the groom of the Church, as the head of the Mystical Body, and as the Good Shepherd of Scripture. Further, as Ernst Kantorowicz has documented, from the analogy of Christ's double nature as expressed in the Athanasian Creed, Elizabethan jurists had drawn the analogy of ‘the King's two bodies': the King dies as man, but the King, the anointed office, is immortal. In this political sense, then, Duncan has never died. Macduff had come to wake the king and, though it seems a Providential equivocation worthy of the witches, he does wake the King in the figure of Malcolm. And it is Malcolm who remains rightful king through Scotland's darkest hours.

But clearly, the political justification for completing the sacrificial pattern with an Easter morning resurrection would remain little more than hollow and appliqued historicism were it not for Duncan's more important role in imitation of Christ. Duncan has been sacrificed as his exemplar was. Macduff's image of “sacrilegious Murther,” culminating a pattern of diabolical invocation, mock Offertory, and Last Supper, describes a black parody of Christ's sacrifice. Macbeth has “broke ope / The Lord's anointed Temple, and stole thence / The life o'th' building”; the rending of the bed curtain, the forced access through Duncan's flesh, the rape of the tabernacle—those superimposed pictures Macduff asks us to imagine—have been the blasphemous perversion of the Blood Sacrifice of the New Law.

At Christ's death the rending of the curtain which isolated the Holy of Holies signified that a heavenly sanctuary had superseded the Old Testament type. The curtain itself typified Christ's flesh: “seeing therfore brethren that by the meanes of the bloud of Jesu, we have liberty to enter into the holy place by the newe and living waye, which he hath prepared for us, through the vayle (that is to saye, by his fleshe): … let us drawe nye. …” Christ (as High Priest) allowed His flesh to be rent (as Victim) that we might have unimpeded access through the curtain to the heavenly sanctuary. Moreover, the “wine of life” which flowed from Christ's flesh was redemptive; it promised future life. For this reason, his death on Good Friday woke the dead to the promise of a final awakening: “And beholde, the vayle of the temple did rent into two partes, from the top to the botome, and the yerth did quake, and the stones rent, and the graues did open, and many bodies of the
saintes, which slept, arose and went out of the graves after his resurrection, and came into the holy city, and appeared unto many” (Matt. 27: 51-53). As the Easter Anthem states, Christ's death enabled us to conquer death: “Christ is risen againe: the first fruits of them that sleep: for seeing that by man came death, by man also cometh the resurrection of the dead. For as by Adam all men doe die, so by Christe all men shalbe restored to lyfe.” Macbeth's blasphemous murder of the “anointed” king had anticipated a resurrection to judgment; Duncan's sacrifice in imitation of Christ promises a resurrection to life. Both the “fair” and the “foul” perspectives of the regicide are reflected in Macduff's imagery and in the symbolic hurlyburly on stage.

The dramatic allusion to the Harrowing of Hell evokes the context of Christ's victory over Satan, and the explicit imagery of apocalyptic portents, sacramental sacrifice, and awakening from the grave recall the final resurrection to life promised in His death and resurrection. These reverberations, together with Duncan's political and sacrificial imitations of Christ, justify the reading of Macduff’s “foul” images as “fair” images which prefigure good tidings. This grand equivocation, the “fair and foul” ambiguity at the heart of the tragedy, supports the two structural movements of the play. Both the psychological tragedy of crime and punishment and the tragicomic movement of death and regeneration are adumbrated in the discovery scene. And perhaps equally important, the distanced perspective which recognizes the “fair” promise implicit in Macduff's “foul” tidings recognizes as well that a cosmic playwright more powerful than the witches is asserting control over the world stage and guiding the forces of restoration, his ministers on earth:

Is gone to pray the holy King, upon his aid
To wake Northumberland, and warlike Siward;
That, by the help of these (with Him above
To ratify the work), we may again
Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights,
Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives,
Do faithful homage, and receive free honours ...

(III.vi.29-36)

The restoration will reestablish the rightful relationship of God and his earthly servants and return to Scotland the fruitful and gracious kingship which Duncan had embodied.

It is in this sense, then, that Duncan is resurrected on earth in the figure of Malcolm. In act IV, scene iii, a scene symbolic of Malcolm's awakening to kingship, the son comes to embody the innocence and saintliness of his father much as he renews his role as king. Duncan had earlier pronounced his son heir apparent, indeed almost “planted” his son heir apparent in that peculiarly rich context of sowing and reaping. Then and throughout the play the natural cycle which turns from seed to harvest to seed calls to mind the double meaning of the scriptural tradition. For Christ and for Duncan as well: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). The scriptural reverberation seems appropriate because Malcolm not only renews Duncan's kingship, he brings it to maturity. The father had promised “signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine / On all deservers” (1.4.41-42); Malcolm fulfills the promise in a verbal recollection of the sovereign planter's recompense and bounty:

Henceforth be Earls; the first that ever Scotland
In such an honour nam'd. What's more to do,
Which would be planted newly with the time, ...

We will perform in measure, time, and place.

(V.ix.28-39)
The continuation and the perfection of Duncan's earthly kingship and his symbolic resurrection in the figure of his son signify what the play insists on time and again: the saintly Duncan has been resurrected to eternal life. Duncan sleeps in peace; his death has borne much fruit on earth and in heaven. Banquo also takes part in the Christian paradigm of death and resurrection. He fathers a line of kings. Macduff had called on Banquo to rise up from his grave, and the “sprite” of Banquo is resurrected in time as dramatic symbol of his plentiful offspring. James I, of course, is the fruit of this rich Christian harvest. Finally, Scotland itself is raised from its death-bed. The day of deliverance is at hand. Malcolm and the forces of restoration are the medicine for the “sickly weal,” and significantly, blood is the restorative agent. Cathness suggests to the others: “… pour we, in our country's purge / Each drop of us,” and Lennox replies, “or so much as it needs / To dew the sovereign flower, and drown the weeds” (V.ii.28-30). Blood is both a restorative agent which brings life and a punitive agent which brings death: fair or foul, lustral sacrifice or bloody slaughter, the vessel of peace or the poisoned chalice. The theme of “miraculous cure” had been introduced explicitly into the play with Edward the Confessor in Act IV, but it had been implicit in Duncan's sacrifice and foreshadowed in Macduff's poetry. The tragicomic movement of the play had been patterned on such a “miraculous cure,” Christ's blood sacrifice and the Christian promise of a resurrection to life.

The “sovereign flower” shall be separated from the “weeds,” the wheat from the chaff, both at the earthly reckoning on the battlefield and at the final reckoning. Macbeth had no issue on earth; in direct contrast to Duncan and Banquo, his death shall bring forth no fruit. Yet the earthly significance figures forth the symbolic one: unlike the father of kings, Macbeth shall die to eternal death.

Is ripe for shaking, and the Powers above Put on their instruments.

(IV.iii.237-39)

The divine playwright of the world stage will enact his decree through his earthly instruments, Malcolm and the forces of restoration. Yet the allusive language recalls the final harvest and the “Babe's” injunction to the angels of judgment: “… for there I will sit to judge all the nations round about. Put in the sickle for the harvest is ripe” (Joel 3:12-13).

The double reference to restoration and Apocalypse, to earthly and heavenly retribution, is recurrent throughout the final scenes of the play. Macbeth snatches confidence from the witches' equivocations and relegates the threat of Banquo's ghastly apparition together with the movement of Birnam wood to a time outside the natural cycle of life:

Rebellious dead, rise never, till the wood Of Birnam rise; and our high-plac'd Macbeth Shall live the lease of Nature, pay his breath To time, and mortal custom.

(IV.i.96-100)

Later, the theme is restated in a description of the restoration forces: “Reven"es burn in them; for their dear causes / Would, to the bleeding and the grim alarm, / Excite the mortified man” (V.ii.3-5). The “rebellious dead” and the “mortified man” join forces with God's soldiers of restoration. Macbeth's hyperbolic bravado and apocalyptic oaths notwithstanding (III.ii.16-19; IV.i.52-61), the symbolic spirits of vengeance will rise when Birnam wood moves and nature runs amuck, just as Macbeth had earlier predicted: “And his gash'd stabs look'd like a breach in nature / For ruin's wasteful entrance' (II.iii.113-14). Putting aside the present false
confidence, the symbolic perspective which recognized that the forced entry through Duncan's flesh led to an earthly and apocalyptic hurlyburly has forecast the “bleeding” and “grim alarm” of act V. Macbeth will once again be swimming in a blood-bath, one whose ambivalent signification signals life and regeneration for Scotland and death and damnation for Macbeth.

The decision to cross the river of blood and to smother surmise in function had momentarily drawn the curtain on the theater of the mind. He had drowned his conscience through habitual blood-bath and with it his imaginative vision of the world. The conjunction of hand and head obliterated the interior distance he once had on his actions. The cold, objective tone of “the yellow leaf” (V.iii.22-28) is not that of “rapt” self-appraisal; Macbeth looks at his life as a tired old actor looking at his role. Lady Macbeth's death gives the actor a similar pause:

Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(V.v.23-28)

Macbeth sees himself, finally, as a ranting tyrant on an absurd world stage. He has been an instrument of chaos in a diabolical scenario, a poor player (like all the rest) whose life can have only one meaningful issue—death. The double reference of the imagination has collapsed in the end to an absolute literalness: life is totally without significance. The witches and the supernatural “idiot” they represent have betrayed the actor into the irrational drama he had mistaken for “the imperial theme.”

But never has Macbeth been so wrong. He himself has been the “idiot,” his drama one of self-betrayal, and his actions charged with symbolic significance. When Macbeth learns that Birnam wood approaches and that nature has run amuck, a final psychological reflux floods his little theater. The witches' equivocations throw Macbeth back on his own resources, and he once again writes the script for his own tragedy. With death at hand, in utter desperation and with bestial defiance, he forfeits the security of the castle, reads apocalypse into the moment (“Blow, wind! come, wrack!”), and dares the hurlyburly. The irrational playwright creates a closing movement for the absurd drama of chaos which he himself had written all along. And yet, from a second distanced perspective on the action, the audience recognizes that the true cosmic playwright now controls the world stage and is prepared to create pattern out of the chaos and significance out of Malcolm's victory and Macbeth's defeat. Ironically and pointedly, Macbeth's psychological stage this time complements hand-in-glove a wider symbolic drama not of the witches' making as he had earlier hoped, but of God's as he had earlier feared. The alarum bell rings once again, and five times in the sixty lines before the tyrant's death we hear that psychic trumpet, now dramatic symbol of Macbeth's damnation and Scotland's resurrection.

Notes

1. Act III, scene vi introduces the counter-movement of the play. The structural divide is so prominent that Henry N. Paul thinks the conclusion of the play was written several months after the start; see his The Royal Play of Macbeth (New York: Macmillan, 1950), pp. 36ff., 304ff.
3. The ambiguities and ironies of the sergeant's narrative have been pointed out often. See especially John Holloway, The Story of the Night (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 58ff.
4. I am referring only to the dramatic function of the witches in this paragraph. Shakespeare seems to have left open the more difficult and perhaps extraneous question of their ontology; see, for example,
A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: Macmillan, 1904), pp. 340-49, and Madeleine Doran, “That Undiscovered Country,” *PQ* [*Philological Quarterly*], 20 (1941), 413-27. I hope to make clear, however, that although the witches convey an initial impression of determinism the audience soon recognizes that Macbeth is self-betrayed and that the witches who know the future do not determine the future.

5. See Muir's note, p. 20.


7. I follow Muir who quotes from Coverdale. See also Matt. 24:31 and 1 Thess. 4:16.

8. Shakespeare could not risk an on-stage murder like that in *Julius Caesar*, for example, where the bare-faced treachery and bloody slaughter mock the ritual sacrifice Brutus had envisioned. “Shakespeare magnifies the horror of the dead by continually shifting its outlines, else it would find a fixed lodgement in our imaginations and become a vulgar crime. We are never allowed to see its real face”—quoted from *Macbeth*, ed. Mark Harvey Liddell (New York: Doubleday, 1904), p. 51.


10. The verses are taken from the Scottish Liturgy of 1637; see *Anglican Liturgies of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. W. Jardine Grisbrooke (London: SPCK, 1958), pp. 168-69. I am not offering a textual allusion but a conceptual analogy in citing the anachronistic 1637 Liturgy. Perhaps the best explanation of the Offertory symbolism is found in the rubric of a late 17th century liturgy: “It being the Ancient Holy rite, among all mankind, to pay Honour to God, by making their Address to Him with Presents and Offerings, in Recognition of his absolute Dominion, and their dependence upon and Subjection to Him (as with us Freeholders, pay their chief rents to the Lord of whom they hold) … the People are to be instructed and admonished to present their Offerings with Reverence, as the Offerings of God, and to God, for the Purpose aforesaid, and as Symbolical Oblations of Themselves, and all they are or have, unto Him. …”; see the “Liturgy of Edward Stephens” (c. 1696) in *Anglican Liturgies*, p. 210.


17. From the eating of the “insane root,” to the banquet betrayal (I.vii), to the slaughter of sleep (chief nourisher of life’s feast), to Duncan's horses devouring one another, to the maws of kites and the slaughter of sleep (chief nourisher of life’s feast), to Duncan's horses devouring one another, to the maws of kites and the slaughter of sleep, to the banquet betrayal (I.vii), to the slaughter of sleep, to the maws of kites and the slaughter of sleep—eating is perverted throughout. So, too, the metaphors of drinking—from the poisoned chalice, to the drunken hope, to the limbec of reason. Everyone seems to be drinking the night of the murder, including Lady Macbeth (II.ii.1), and the effect is to frame Macbeth's blasphemy with an ugly perverted naturalism.


20. Prayer-Books, p. 385. See also the Holy Thursday Epistle (1 Cor. 27).


22. B. L. Reid links the imagery of the discovery scene with the sleepwalking scene in “Macbeth and the Play of Absolutes,” Sew, 73 (1965), pp. 30, 42.


24. This is not to say that it is only a royal play. The approximate dates of composition are Henry N. Paul's; see The Royal Play of Macbeth, p. 237ff.


27. Heb. 10:19-22; quoted from Prayer-Books, p. 103. The passage was recited in the Good Friday Epistle.

28. Quoted from Prayer-Books, p. 85. This was the Palm Sunday Gospel.

29. Ibid., p. 371.

30. Shakespeare has telescoped Malcolm’s coming-of-age in England into the opening confrontation with Macduff. The audience last saw Malcolm after his father's murder; he was weak and cowardly, fleeing personal danger and, in effect, abdicating his election to the throne. As the scene opens, the audience recognizes once again the weak, ineffectual boy; it does not know, any more than Macduff, that Malcolm is testing him. For Macduff and for the audience as well, Malcolm is transformed in the course of the scene from weakness to strength, from personal degradation to sainthood. The test is for Malcolm a symbolic purge of weakness and sin, a preparation for kingship; for the audience, it is a symbolic awakening to kingship. For the first time in the play Malcolm assumes the stature of his saintly father and his saintly mother. She also, one notes, “dies daily” in imitation of Christ: “O God, who for our redemption dyddest geue thyne only begotten sonne to the death of the Crosse: and by his glorious resurreccion haste delyuered us from the power of our enemye: Graunte us so to dye dayle from synne, that we maye euermore lyve with him in the joy of hys resurrecftion; through the same Christe our Lorde. Amen.” Easter Anthem, quoted from Prayer-Books, p. 110.

31. A similar point is made by M. C. Bradbrook, “The Sources of Macbeth” (p. 38), and by Henry N. Paul, The Royal Play of Macbeth (pp. 177-78). The earthly “fruit” Duncan's death engenders and the king’s “perfection” in the figure of Malcolm are related, I suspect, to Malcolm as founder of the Scottish dynasty.

32. W. A. Murray thinks that the “perfection” of Duncan's earthly life in heaven is suggested by the image of his “golden blood.” This would be consistent with the play's symbolism and with Macbeth's imagination. He looks at the real blood and in gilding it in the gold perfection of heaven reads the future into it: “Here lay Duncan, / His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood” (II.iii.11-12). See “Why Was Duncan's Blood Golden?,” ShS, 19 (1966), 34-44, esp. p. 42.

33. The metaphor of “perfection” may also apply here. Banquo's “blood-bolter'd” head, the twenty mortal murders on his “crown,” seems to be perfected on earth in the “gold-bound brows” of his lineage; see IV.i.112-24.
As I understand the passage, “Macbeth is ripe for shaking” as the grain harvest is ripe for threshing. The angels take up their sickles for the final harvest in which the wheat shall be separated from the chaff. I cite Joel 3:12-13, but the harvest of judgment imagery is recurrent throughout the Old and New Testaments.


Criticalism: Overviews And General Studies: Nicholas Brooke (essay date 1990)


In the following excerpt, Brooke surveys the importance of stage illusion to Macbeth and examines Shakespeare's rich use of language in the drama.

1. ILLUSION

Macbeth was first produced at a time of radical theatrical change in England. It seems to have been written during 1606 and to have been presented at the Globe Theatre fairly late in that year, and so to have been conceived for performance in daylight, in a constantly light space which could not be physically transformed into darkness. Two years later, in 1608-9, Shakespeare's company, the King's Men, took over the Blackfriars Theatre which had been adapted from the hall of the medieval friary and was therefore basically a dark space into which artificial light had to be introduced—which has been the normal state of all European theatres ever since. From then until the London theatres were finally closed in the 1650s after repeated injunctions from Cromwell's government the repertory had to be adapted for performance in both theatres, in both conditions. Shakespeare's last plays, from The Winter's Tale to The Tempest (including his collaborations with Fletcher) show remarkable ingenuity in devising spectacular effects which could take advantage of the dark theatre and of the experience of the company in participating in Court masques, while still being performable at the Globe. Most of Shakespeare's earlier plays could no doubt have been easily adapted for revival in the new situation since the basic configuration of the stage seems to have been much the same, but Macbeth was a special case: about two-thirds of this play written for the daylight theatre is set in darkness.

All theatre depends, in one way or another, on illusion, but Macbeth is exceptional in affirming continuously a direct contradiction of the natural conditions: the transformation of daylight into darkness is a tour de force which establishes illusion as, not merely a utility, but a central preoccupation of the play, dramatically announced by an opening unique in Shakespeare's plays, the use of the non-naturalistic prologue by the Weird Sisters in 1.1. There follows a carefully controlled range of forms of dramatic illusion which needs to be enumerated, not only because it is so frequently mutilated by the naturalistic tradition of modern theatre, but also because it clarifies the study of illusion as a structural foundation of the play.

1. Darkness in daylight is established symbolically by torches and candles whose effect depended on the power of theatrical convention to which a modern audience cannot respond so directly as a Jacobean one, but that is greatly extended linguistically by direct statements, allusions, or indirect suggestion of verbal imagery. The sequence of dark scenes is initiated in 1.5 by Lady Macbeth's invocation to the powers of darkness (39-53), and by her later reference to ‘This night's great business’ (67); it is sustained through all major scenes until the end of 4.1. The Folio text calls for Hautboys and Torches at the beginning of 1.6, but that is probably a book-keeper's anticipation of props needed to open 1.7, where they stress the arrival of darkness alongside a dumb-show of preparations for the evening feast; 1.6 opens in dialogue that reverses the illusion of darkness, Duncan and Banquo exchanging descriptions of the castle's pleasant seat, air, jutty, frieze, the martlet's procreant cradle, etc. This is regularly quoted as an example of Shakespeare's use of words to set a scene, but
in truth it is not typical; it is quite exceptional in its invitation to detailed visualization; what we must visualize
is not there, of course, but the implied daylight literally is. The illusion of darkness can be withdrawn at will
(and then resumed), but with the significant irony that Duncan and Banquo misread the signs: there is nothing
gentle or procreant here.

2. The Weird Sisters are visible to us, and to Macbeth, and to the less questionable sight of Banquo (a
touchstone of common sense, like Horatio in Hamlet, even if less solid). The Sisters cannot be reduced to
projections of Macbeth's mind, they are not mere delusions; though just what Macbeth and Banquo see is very
questionable. Banquo describes them while they are on stage:

So withered, and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th'inhabitants o'th' earth
And yet are on't?

(1.3.39-42)

No wonder presentations in the theatre vary so much, since they cannot be made to 'look like' this; and if they
could, Banquo's words would be redundant. Word, here, is against sight: we are bound to see that they are not
what Banquo says; but it is more likely that his description influences our perception than that we conclude
that his sight is different from ours. The ambiguity extends to their nature: there is still argument as to whether
they are supernatural, or merely village witches, strange old women, as Banquo's later words suggest:

And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.

(45-7)

They call themselves the Weird Sisters, and Banquo and Macbeth refer to them as such; the only time the
word 'witch' is heard in the theatre is in l. 6 of this scene, when the First Witch quotes the words of the
sailor's wife as the supreme insult for which her husband must be tortured. 'Weird' did not come to its loose
modern usage before the early nineteenth century; it meant Destiny or Fate, and foreknowledge is clearly the
Sisters' main function. But the nature of their powers is still ambiguous: they are actively malicious to the
master o'th' Tiger, but have not the power to destroy him:

Though his bark cannot be lost,
Yet it shall be tempest-tossed.

(24-5)

They can appear to Macbeth at will (theirs or his), but confine their interference to prediction. All these
powers were, of course, attributed to village witches, but the Weird Sisters are more decisively supernatural;
confusion has largely arisen because the Folio text refers to them in stage directions and speech prefixes as
'witches'. Their ambiguity, of nature and of power, is fundamental to the ambiguities of experience and
knowledge which the play develops.

The conflict of words and appearance is repeated at their exit: we must 'see' them go, but we cannot this time
(when they are no longer there) verify the description:

BANQUO

The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,
And these are of them; whither are they vanished?

MACBETH

Into the air; and what seemed corporal melted

As breath into the wind.

(79-82)

Whether they actually go into smoke, down a trap, or flying, it cannot ‘look like’ this; sight ceases to be rationally reliable:

BANQUO

Were such things here as we do speak about?

Or have we eaten on the insane root

That takes the reason prisoner?

(83-5)

3. The dagger is an opposite case: the Weïrd Sisters are attested by sight (ours and Banquo's, besides Macbeth's) but are indefinite in form; the dagger is entirely specific in form though not literally seen by anyone—even Macbeth knows it is not there:

Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation
Proceeding from the heat-oppressèd brain?

(2.1.37-40)

This kind of optical illusion is well known, especially in feverish conditions—the brain registers as sight what is not directly stimulated by optic nerve. Macbeth proceeds to confuse perception further by drawing his actual dagger and then seeing the illusory one as still more vivid, with 'gouts of blood, ich was not so before' (47-8)—which is how the actual one will be in the next scene.

Words play a great part here, but not words alone: the invisible dagger is necessarily created also by his body, gesture, and above all by his eyes, which focus on a point in space whose emptiness becomes, in a sense, visible to the audience.

4. Banquo's ghost is different again: it is seen by Macbeth, it was seen by Simon Forman at the Globe in 1610-11, and it has been seen by audiences in most productions since. Thus far it contrasts with the dagger, but it is also in a different case from the Weïrd Sisters because it is seen by no one else on stage:

LADY Macbeth

You look but on a stool.
This differs from the dagger because the emptiness here is not of our perceiving, and from the Sisters because here the ‘reliable witnesses’ contradict our sight. Scepticism, therefore, becomes as questionable as credulity. The whole effect is aborted if, as so often nowadays, no physical ghost appears on stage.

5. *The apparitions* in 4.1 are a climax to this sequence of stage illusion tricks, though the formal elaboration is not technically the most surprising or exciting (it neither requires nor gets the conjuring-trick surprise of the others). It can use elaborate machinery, but it can equally be done with simple effects—cauldron, smoke, a trap, or even less. It is the Weird Sisters' fullest scene, and it is their last; but however superbly nasty their incantation and however spectacular what follows, it does not aim at mystification, and the recapitulation of their disappearance in 1.3—Lennox seeing nothing of their departure (4.1.151-2)—does not this time conflict with our sight since he was off-stage at the time.

From this point on there is a radical change in the presentation of illusion: rational sight progressively displaces potential deception.

6. *Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking* in 5.1 is essentially about delusion, but caused by psychological disturbance not by supernatural agency; our recognition of a natural phenomenon is endorsed by Doctor and Nurse, who also recognize a connection with guilt dreams in its jumble of displaced memories. The mysterious is being progressively dissipated and is finally eliminated in

7. *Birnam Wood*, whose moving is an exercise in camouflage (5.4.4-7) of a kind which is still a commonplace of infantry tactics. Illusion is being reduced to rational explanation, and the cheating account of Macduff's birth (5.7.45-6) marks the end of this process. There are, in Macbeth's words, 'no more sights' (4.1.170); the audience is given a full explanation of Birnam Wood before the event, and will scarcely be surprised by the revelation of Macduff's birth.

*The Tempest* follows a remarkably similar pattern through a varied range of stage illusions to their formal climax in the masque of goddesses (4.1.39-142), and thereafter a progressive withdrawal until the final 'magic'—Ferdinand and Miranda discovered playing chess (5.1.173.1)—is magical only to that part of the stage audience which believed them dead; to us it requires only the pulling of a curtain. At the end, Prospero's epilogue has the actor asking for applause to release him finally from his role. But *The Tempest* opens with an exceptional display of realism, the presentation of a shipwreck on stage, which is then immediately revealed as the dramatic illusion which, of course, it has to be:

MIRANDA

If by your art, my dearest father, you have

Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them.

(1.2.1-2)

That calls immediate attention to the nature of dramatic illusion, and establishes it as mediator between Magus controlling his spirits, and naturalistic rationalism. In *Macbeth* it is the opening by the Weird Sisters which proposes a relation between supernatural and natural phenomena. No amount of quotation from King James's early and credulous *Demonology*\(^1\) will transfer the Sisters from a category of belief into one of verifiable knowledge. The Weird Sisters are, like Ariel and Caliban, essentially creatures of drama, not merely naturalistic representations of old women.
8. *Macbeth* does not begin with an illusion of realism, but it does end with one: ‘*Enter Macduff, with Macbeth’s head*’ (5.7.83.1)—presumably stuck on the end of a pike (see ll. 84-5). That direction proposes a *trompe-l’œil* head, an art like that attributed to Giulio Romano at the end of *The Winter’s Tale*, achieved here, no doubt, by a life-mask of Burbage. That final effect is peculiar, for Malcolm, always an equivocal figure, capitalizes briskly on the decapitation ‘Of this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen’ (l. 99). When last seen sleep-walking, Lady Macbeth was anything but fiend-like, and the only visible butcher here is not Macbeth but the ‘heroic’ Macduff with the grotesque head he offers to Malcolm’s ‘Christian’ triumph.

9. The eight distinct forms of dramatic illusion discussed so far are all dependent on staging: darkness in light, the Weird Sisters, the dagger, Banquo’s ghost, the apparitions, Lady Macbeth’s sleep-walking, Birnam Wood, Macbeth’s head. The ninth, recurrent throughout the play, is the purely verbal creation of a highly visual but unseen world of babes and cherubim, rooky wood, murdering ministers, and horses eating each other; the unusual stress on sensory actuality leaves audiences with an undefined sense of having seen, smelt, touched far more than we have, though, as with Macbeth’s dagger, we know there’s no such thing.

2. LANGUAGE

The most elaborate instance of spectacular linguistic effect is Macbeth’s soliloquy at the opening of 1.7, which is striking not only for the achievement of its climax, but also for the process by which that is arrived at, and the rapid transpositions of language involved. It opens with a notably plain vocabulary, but a syntax so contorted as to amount to word-juggling:

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If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly;
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(1-2)

The tongue-twisting implies mental conflict, with a growing desire to suppress the knowledge of guilt:

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Could trammel up the consequence and catch
With his surcease, success,
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(2-4)

The pattern of conditional clauses is extended, but the vocabulary is now mixed with a number of polysyllabic words emphasizing the evasion of thought: ‘assassination’ and ‘consequence’ act as euphemisms for murder and guilt which emerge in the word-play that translates ‘surcease’ into ‘success’, and so leads to the conditional

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Might be the be-all and the end-all—here,
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(4-5)

The apparent resolution is very similar to ‘*twere well were done quickly’, and equally superficial; the sentence is apparently complete, but an attempt is made to strengthen it by syntactic doubling of the last word which functions both as end of that clause and beginning of the next (hence the editorial problem of punctuation):

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But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We’d jump the life to come.
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The monosyllables return to close, finally, the long contorted sentence. But the simplicity is deceptive, for the strong rhetorical gesture allows another suppressed level of thought to emerge, religious fear. It is immediately withdrawn, at the expense of reopening the argument:

We still have judgement here,

A third ‘here’ takes us back to the false hope of resolution, and refutes it, but ‘judgement’ does not immediately signify the law, or rather is not allowed to, for the obscure words that follow deal apparently only with the inevitability of revenge:

Bloody instructions, which being taught, return
To plague th'inventor.

‘Bloody’ and ‘plague’ betray the evasions, and the language expands to reveal the power of what has been evaded:

Commends th'ingredience of our poisoned chalice
To our own lips.

The emblematic justice leads to ‘ingredience’ and ‘chalice’, both words with strong ecclesiastical associations. Justice and religion have both emerged again, in a language more expansive and elevated than any before. It is, once again, returned to a manageable level, of socio-moral orthodoxy, the ties of kinsman, subject, and host; but what follows after is quite extraordinary:

Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or Heaven's cherubim, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye
That tears shall drown the wind.

It is the process, here, which is all-important: the process of amplification from Duncan's virtues to ‘the sightless couriers of the air’ is startling in its strangeness. Cleanth Brooks, in a celebrated essay on the naked new-born babe, noted the strangeness but after enumerating the other references to babes in the play (which are indeed striking) concluded as though the significant image-train resolved the superficial strangeness. It does not, because it is not simply the individual images that are strange, but the very structure in which they emerge, and explanation must not dispel that.
Language has been under pressure from the beginning of the speech: here that is even more marked and more
concentrated in syntax, words, and images; the argument is sustained, with the suppressed allusions to law and
to religion emerging through what are in effect puns, though very far removed from jokes, and to them is now
added a dimension of rhetorical grandeur which may have been implied before, but has never yet been
allowed to develop. The primary sense of ‘plead’ here is the legal one, but associated with angels it
immediately takes on the sense of ‘beg’ which leads towards ‘pity’ two lines later. The angels themselves
appear first as a simple cliché metaphor, but immediately become concrete, blowing trumpets, and transpose
through the babe into Heaven's cherubim; simultaneously the ‘blast’ is the jet of air on which the babe strides,
and which can be seen as the jets blown through the trumpets, and it is also the sound which the trumpets
make; in both senses it ‘blows the horrid deed’.

The main image-trains are therefore of sight and of sound. The sound is an obvious crescendo from ‘plead’
through ‘trumpet’ to ‘blast’. Sight is equally achieved as crescendo, first by becoming progressively more
specific from the vague ‘angels’, through ‘trumpet-tongued’ into the insistently detailed ‘naked new-born
babe’, and then by literal enlargement from ‘babe’ through cherubim, ambiguously represented either as
cherubic babies or as androgynous adolescents in paintings of the period, which in final glory mount the
sightless couriers of the air. ‘Sightless’ means both ‘blind’ (as winds move blindly) and ‘invisible’, and at this
point the whole visual structure dissolves into the unvisualizable ‘Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye at
tears shall drown the wind’. Sight and sound equally disappear in this rhythmic cadence, and distinct sense
with them; the tears should be such as angels weep, but that sense is lost in the diminuendo which follows the
climax; it is possible to rationalize the lines in various ways (wind causes eyes to water), but it is clearly
irrelevant to do so: the grand vision has dissolved.

But Macbeth's speech does not end there, his argument is sustained in simple metaphor:

To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition ...

(25-7)

The whole passage is, of course, constructed out of metaphor, but in a peculiar way: the vision is a
self-sustaining structure of words closely related by juxtaposition, but not by syntax. The repetition of
‘like’—‘plead like angels’, ‘pity, like a … babe’, extended by implication in ‘or [like] Heaven's
cherubim’—divides tenor and vehicle so emphatically that these should function as simple expository
metaphors where all the stress is on the tenor, Macbeth's moral argument. In fact, we almost lost sight of that
until it re-emerges in the final lines where the horse metaphor is indeed used again, but now it really is
expository, affirming the nature of ambition. In the mean time the extraordinary baroque vision has been
entirely created out of the metaphoric vehicles. The eruption stresses, certainly, the legal and (paramount here)
the religious thoughts which Macbeth has tried all along to suppress, and thus far a Freudian account of the
speech will satisfy; but only thus far. We certainly credit Macbeth with religious fears, but to credit him with
the specific images of them would inevitably lead to Bradley's error of assuming him to be an exceptionally
imaginative man. That would make him a poet, and depend on the same fallacy as believing that because most
of Shakespeare's characters speak in blank verse they are all poets.

This constitutes an exceptional difficulty for the actor: not all the words he has to speak as Macbeth can
properly be said to constitute part of his sub-text for the role. Macbeth and Richard III both demand virtuoso
acting, but whereas Richard is a show-piece for the actor's skills, Macbeth offers virtually no scope for an
actor's egotism. His language is, and is not, the property of his role, for it recurs in other speakers, most
conspicuously Lady Macbeth. It is unique to the play, not to the man. Ben Jonson wrote in Timber 'Language
most shows a man: speak that I may see thee', and applied this principle in his plays, creating distinctive
languages for his major characters; they often speak verse, but their poetry is an extension of their idiosyncratic speech, as with Mammon or Subtle, or commonly enough of the role they are for the moment playing, as with Doll, Face, or Volpone. There is almost no problem in Jonson's plays of characters speaking a language which is rather a property of the play than of themselves. Nor is there with some of Shakespeare's most obvious 'character' roles, such as Juliet's nurse or Shylock: their very distinctive speech intensifies into its own verse, but that verse remains distinctively their own and finds no reflection in other utterances (except by direct parody). That is, however, a fairly rare distinction in Shakespeare's work; minor members of the cast are always liable to break out into language of which, it is clearly understood, they can have no personal experience—the Welsh Captain, for instance, in Richard II, or Vernon in 1 Henry IV:

All plumed like ostriches, that with the wind
.....Baiting like eagles having lately bathed,
Glittering in golden coats like images ...

(4.1.98-101)

They are images: images of the show that Henry is putting on; and, because it is not simply show, images of a glorious honour which is one co-ordinate of the play; but they are not at all images of Vernon, whose language elsewhere is plain and undistinguished—we see the images and not the man.

But at least there the language is not in necessary contradiction of the man, an undefined soldier who may be supposed to rise to fine sights. Shakespeare sometimes went further:

The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day.
Now spurs the lated traveller apace
To gain the timely inn ...

(3.3.5-7)

There has been wild speculation on the identity of the Third Murderer in Macbeth, but none about the First, who speaks these lines; they belong absolutely to the play and are alien to the speaker.

It is a large step from what can loosely be called 'choric' speeches for minor characters to the major soliloquies of the principals, for they are certainly men and women and unquestionably shown by their speech. But the mode of showing, and the degree, still varies substantially. Richard III's opening soliloquy is composed out of two much older conventions, that of the Presenter (or Chorus), and that of the self-declaration of the Vice; it becomes more than either in the knowing self-projection of Richard into both roles, yet it still serves both functions as well. Hamlet's soliloquies are usually discussed as direct self-revelations of a very self-conscious man, and that seems appropriate: he speaks a variety of languages, and when he waxes most poetical it is always recognizable as self-dramatization. All his languages do echo elsewhere in the play from speakers as diverse as Horatio, Polonius, Claudius, and the Ghost; the inner and outer bearings of man and environment are significantly equivalent, and just as the man has no easily recognized integrity, so also the play has no single language by which it can be identified. Othello is a different case, for what Wilson Knight dubbed the 'Othello music' does substantially characterize the play; but it is spoken by Othello alone and so generates the well-worn critical problem that only Othello can articulate his own valediction: he alone has the language worthy of it—or, as T. S. Eliot suggested, he is 'cheering himself up'. That is not a problem in Antony and Cleopatra, for although the play's characteristic magnificence is distinctively embodied in hero and heroine, their language is heard in various other mouths: in Philo's opening speech (1.1.1-13), Enobarbus's 'The barge she sat in' (2.2.197-246), and even from Caesar when he reminisces about Antony in the Alps (1.4.55-71). It adumbrates an imperial theme in the largest terms, yet it is always used by or about the man and woman: the principle that it 'shows' them is not violated. The fact that an actor may speak a language remote from the individual he represents is very clear here, yet it
is not conspicuously a problem.

*Macbeth* is a different matter. We know the First Murderer speaks for the play, not for himself; so, really, do Duncan and Banquo in 1.6:

**DUNCAN**

This castle hath a pleasant seat, the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses.

**BANQUO**

The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,
By his loved mansionry, that the Heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here …

(1-6)

The benignity may fit Duncan; it is not especially characteristic of Banquo (nor necessarily inappropriate either). Ross and the Old Man in 2.4 function like the Welsh Captain, but with a language so like Macbeth's own that the distinction of man from words is even more striking:

And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp;
Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame,
That darkness does the face of earth entomb
When living light should kiss it?

(6-10)

The characteristics amplify as they describe Duncan's horses:

Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,
Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,
Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would
Make war with mankind.

(15-18)

That is not said about Macbeth, but it might perfectly be said by him. He sees strange sights, but they are not distinctively his. We do not credit all his words to his distinct consciousness, and frequently do not know whether to do so or not. An obvious case is his speech after the murder is revealed:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had lived a blessèd time …

(2.3.93-4)
The words so perfectly extend his private musings before the event that it is quite ambiguous whether they are here a private utterance or a public speech. Kenneth Muir argued that Macbeth was unconscious of the truth of his words, but he quoted Middleton Murry to the opposite effect: ‘Macbeth must needs be conscious of the import of the words that come from him.’ The choice is vitally important for an actor, since it involves the difference between an aside and an address to others on the stage. I am positive that Murry was wrong, but not positive that Muir was right. The ambiguity remains, and the actor need not eliminate it. But this is certain, that Macbeth may speak words beyond his consciousness; which means that his language may show us things other than the man.

I have shown that ambiguity in the opening soliloquy of 1.7; it does not only affect Macbeth: Lady Macbeth frequently uses a very similar language, and the actress has similar problems to contend with. They are made more acute by the more positive form of statement to which she is prone:

How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me …

(1.7.54-5)

The question whether Lady Macbeth ever had a child has been so much discussed that it is hard now to tell how odd her words should sound. In theory it should be impossible to go behind the direct assertion of a dramatic character and question its veracity unless the context gives her the lie. Macbeth does not retort ‘When did you ever give suck?’; so there it is, she did. Or did she? Dover Wilson quoted Eckermann's Conversations with Goethe for 18 April 1827: ‘Whether this be true or not does not appear; but the lady says it, and she must say it, in order to give emphasis to her speech.’ Exactly: and it is impenetrably ambiguous whether she means it, let alone whether it is true or not. But as an imaginative fact that babe is certainly very vivid to us in ways that are no part of Lady Macbeth's consciousness: it takes its place, with Macbeth's naked new-born babe, and all the other babes of the play, in a dimension well beyond the reach of the characters.

I do not believe that that example need be any special problem to the actress; but Lady Macbeth's earlier soliloquy, in 1.5, unquestionably is:

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty.

(39-42)

The actress's problem is whether to make this a literal invocation of the spirits, in which case she must enact some appropriate ritual on the stage, or to project it as at least partly metaphoric, an extreme form of autosuggestion. Kenneth Muir argued decisively for the first, believing that it was Mrs Siddons's interpretation, quoting her ‘Remarks on the Character of Lady Macbeth’: '[She] having impiously delivered herself up to the excitements of hell … is abandoned to the guidance of the demons she has invoked.' But I am not certain this is quite literal: Mrs Siddons invoked her spirits in a whisper, and the effect is rather that the demons turned out more real than she imagined—as conscience does later in the sleep-walking scene (5.1). If she does literally enact a ritual, it becomes odd that no other such ritual ever occurs, just as the solitary reference to her child becomes odd if it is literally believed. Muir commented that we need not necessarily assume that Shakespeare himself believed in demoniacal possession; I agree, but would add that we need not necessarily believe that Lady Macbeth did either. If, on the other hand, the speech is allowed a primarily metaphoric force, then its extraordinary language tends to divide its reference (never, of course, precisely) between a relatively simple level corresponding to her consciousness, and a far more obscure level in which her words reverberate with images we do not specifically understand to be hers.
Lady Macbeth's speech therefore resembles Macbeth's of fifty lines later in its double focus—on herself, and far outside herself. It resembles it also in structure. She began, before the Messenger's entry, with a direct discussion of Macbeth's tricky conscience:

That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false, And yet wouldst wrongly win.

(19-21)

a syntactic tangle which is closely echoed in Macbeth's tongue-twisting opening. From there, as Macbeth's images amplify through deep damnation to the naked new-born babe and Heaven's cherubim, so hers expand from

The raven himself is hoarse That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan Under my battlements.

(37-9)
to 'Come, you spirits' and so to 'Make thick my blood' and

And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers, Wherever, in your sightless substances, You wait on nature's mischief.

(46-9)
The spirits have become 'murd'ring ministers' and finally 'thick night' as the speech reaches its climax in Hell and Heaven:

And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell, That my keen knife see not the wound it makes, Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark To cry, 'Hold, hold'.

(49-53)
The one verbal echo in Macbeth's speech is of the striking use of 'sightless' meaning both 'blind' and 'invisible'—'sightless substances' and 'sightless couriers of the air'. Finally, Lady Macbeth ends, as Macbeth does later, in plain language, though in both cases it is unclear whether the thought is complete or is interrupted: she ends 'To cry, “Hold, hold”' and he enters, while he ends 'which o'erleaps itself d falls on th' other' and she enters. In both speeches the extraordinary imagery is left behind, and the thought-trains extend beyond it, so that the effect is as though the thought-trains represent the consciousness of the speakers while the image-train in its specific form has been raised above and beyond their distinct consciousnesses. Only, of course, in its specific form; they are understood to use metaphor, and to be able to see ‘sights’, but not necessarily to be aware of these specific sights.

We, on the other hand, are vividly aware of them, of the likeness between them, and of the likeness to other utterances by the Macbeths and by other people in the play—Duncan and Banquo, Ross and the Old Man, the First Murderer, and so on. The situation resembles that of a traditional mode of painting where human figures
are shown at ground level in a rapt contemplation in which they may well see visions, but do not seem to be seeing the specific angels, devils, or other images which are painted around and above them. Pictorially that is a common enough convention; dramatically it may often be partially realized, but in such a fully developed form Macbeth is unique, as it is unique in the extent of specific visualizing it demands of its audience. The effect is achieved by an ambiguity of reference: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth do ‘see’, and they do use metaphor, yet the extraordinary visual details strike us as not actually theirs, as in fact a property of the play which exists outside them. Not merely outside them, but almost in opposition to them, as of something which it would be better for them if they did see: ‘nothing is t what is not’ (1.3.142-3) has more meanings than Macbeth assigns to it, and ‘what is not’ eventually destroys him.

Their languages are finally brought together in 3.2. Lady Macbeth opens, as both of them had in Act 1, with a see-saw structure:

Where our desire is got without content;
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy,
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.

(5-8)

She is interrupted by Macbeth's entry, and he seems to amplify her meaning:

Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy.

(21-4)

But their understandings are exactly opposite; she proposes to beat down the fear, ‘Things without all remedy ould be without regard—what's done, is done’ (ll. 12-13); while he hints at further action:

O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife—
Thou know' st that Banquo and his Fleance lives.

(39-40)

She meets that with ambiguity: ‘But in them nature's copy's not eterne’ (l. 41). She, it appears, understands ‘they won't live for ever’, whereas he takes her words to imply ‘they can be killed’; ‘There's comfort yet, they are assailable’ (l. 42); and so goes on to, ‘there shall be done deed of dreadful note’ (ll. 46-7). His meaning is patent, and she retreets from it, refusing rather than failing to grasp it, as he instantly recognizes:

LADY Macbeth

What's to be done?

MACBETH

Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,

Till thou applaud the deed ...

(47-9)
As he advances in ruthlessness, she retreats in fear; the roles established for them earlier in the play are reversed here, and he proceeds to develop an invocation that follows hers in 1.5 in form, word, and image so closely that in the theatre we need no special training to have at least the feeling that we have heard its like before:

Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale. Light thickens,
And the crow makes wing to th' rooky wood;
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
While night's black agents to their preys do rouse.

(49-56)

The connection is by no means confined to the opening phrase; ‘scarf’ recalls the ‘blanket’ of the dark; ‘tender eye of pitiful day’, the ‘compunctious visitings of nature’; ‘invisible’, ‘sightless’; ‘light thickens’, ‘thick night’; ‘crow’, ‘raven’; and, of course, the opposition of Night and Day is the foundation of the amplifying oppositions on which both speeches are constructed.

In one respect this speech does differ from its predecessors: they were soliloquies interrupted by the other's entrance; here both are on stage, and Macbeth concludes his thought in couplets which are superficially conclusive:

—Thou marvell'st at my words; but hold thee still,
Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill—

(57-8)

‘marvell'st’ is ambiguous; she might well marvel at his images, but at the plain level to which he has now returned, she is only said to be bewildered by what he is talking about—which is Banquo's murder; the point of their dialogue remains unmentioned and unmentionable, as Duncan's murder was in Act 1. This, as before, is the point at which Macbeth's thought-train runs out beyond the image-train, which here never seemed to suggest such literal invocation of spirits as Lady Macbeth's in 1.5. What the couplet establishes is not an accord but the reverse, the final breakdown of communication between them. Macbeth is unique among Shakespeare's tragedies in centring on an intimate marriage (Othello's was never that). In Act 1 they did not hear each other's soliloquies, but always knew each other's thoughts. It is some while before Duncan's murder is made explicit between them, but they know at once that it is in each other's mind. That has, in the past, caused speculation about a missing scene or scenes in which they should have explained their thoughts to each other—which is absurd, because there is nothing even faintly unusual about this degree of understanding between any couple who live together (which is not to say that couples don't often find it remarkable, or that it does not function as part of the structure of supernatural hints in the play; only that it is as natural as sleep-walking). The characters of the two principals are simply and clearly defined, which has made them a favourite topic for junior exams; it is their relationship which is the focus of real interest in the play. It changes radically in 3.2, and they are never intimate again; simultaneously their roles are reversed, and he now displays the determination on blood which was once hers alone, but which she can no longer sustain.

This requires that they shall act very closely together; but the way in which the text presents it gives actors problems. Inevitably, seeking to enlarge the intimacy, they look for further expression of it. In the last fifty years or so this has tended towards sexuality, whether of the crudely obvious kind of Polanski's film (1971), or the more subtle embraces of Jonathan Pryce and Sinead Cusack (RSC 1986-7). The attempt is natural enough, but however it is done it seems curiously extraneous; it calls attention to an important fact: no play of
Shakespeare's makes so little allusion to sex. There is none at all for the editor to explicate in the main scenes, allusions arise only in two places (besides the songs), the Porter's drunken bawdy in 2.3, and Lady Macduff's witty interchange with her son in 4.2. Both are striking interludes of 'normal' humanity offsetting the play's obsessive abnormality: the Porter ushers Macduff in to the hell of Duncan's murder; Lady Macduff's family domesticity gives way to slaughter. Where sexuality might most be expected, between the Macbeths, or in the Weird Sisters' obscenities, it is completely absent. There is another significant absence from the play: although it is politically sensitive and perceptive about the hell of tyranny, it is so exclusively within the narrow society of the thanes; there is no sign of the populace, or of any concern for people at large. Even the laments for Scotland in 4.3, Macduff's 'Bleed, bleed, poor country' (l. 31) and Ross's speech at 164-73, treat the country as an emblem without specifying its people. The Weird Sisters, again, do not invite thought about the social problems of old women on their own, nor about witchcraft as an attack on women altogether, though the best known of Elizabethan studies of witchcraft, Scot's *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), concentrated on both, and castigated the witch-hunters for the evil manifestation they were; even King James, though he had been all too credulous in his early *Demonology*, became increasingly sceptical later, and though he never shared Scot's total scepticism, yet came to fancy himself more as an exposé of fraud than as a persecutor of witches. Once again, it is the Porter alone who, in his brief scene, reminds the audience of the world that the play elsewhere so completely excludes; as he had from at least the fourteenth century onwards, the drunken clown inverted the assumed hierarchical order of things to assert human concerns supposed to be suppressed; his role and his language, coarse and bawdy prose, are indivisible, and the derisive laughter he so unexpectedly secures (when well played) radically adjusts our perspective on the play, illuminating the exclusions which otherwise we could only suspect. His role as devil-porter relies on the Harrowing of Hell in the mystery-play cycles, though he abandons it before he admits Macduff: however effective it may be to identify Macbeth's castle with Hell, it is not possible to see Macduff as Christ.

The language that I have analysed as characteristic of the play is extraordinarily rich in what it does develop, and remarkable too in its exclusiveness; in politics, *Macbeth* contrasts strikingly with *Julius Caesar* before it and with *Coriolanus* after; they both offer Rome as an entire city-state, and *Lear* indicates a whole society through the curious range of Edgar's disguises; *Antony and Cleopatra*, probably written in the same year as *Macbeth*, is as comprehensive in its political concerns as it is insistent on sexuality. The contrasts identify the peculiar concentration of this play, represented not only in its brevity overall, but also in the density of language which makes commentary so difficult and so rewarding. But this language is closely related to another that recurs in the play, where apparent density turns out only to be tortuous courtesy, where commentary is laborious and unrewarding. The bleeding Sergeant's inflated rhetoric in 1.2 has the function of the classical messenger to explain its diffusion, but Ross's obscurity in 1.3 is more typical:

The King hath happily received, Macbeth,  
The news of thy success; and when he reads  
Thy personal venture in the rebels' fight,  
His wonders and his praises do contend  
Which should be thine, or his.

(89-93)

Superficially this may resemble Macbeth's language, but in fact it is its opposite, and the difference is felt when Macbeth speaks aside a few lines later:

This supernatural soliciting  
Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,  
Why hath it given me earnest of success,  
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.  
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion  
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair  
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Macbeth's words amplify through horrid imaginings to murder, and he concludes that 'nothing is t what is not' (142-3). The whole process, however diffuse and rhetorical it may superficially appear, is at once logically clear and expressively condensed. Ross's speech was neither; his language is an elaborate mask which conceals no substantial meaning.

Later in the play, however, the mask does develop a function, when the conditions of tyranny deprive any communication of mere courtesy, and meaning must be obscured because no man can be trusted. This characterizes 3.6, when Lennox and another lord fence verbally with each other before their mutual sympathy is established:

How it did grieve Macbeth! Did he not straight
In pious rage the two delinquents tear,
That were the slaves of drink, and thralls of sleep?
Was not that nobly done? Ay, and wisely too—
For 'twould have angered any heart alive
To hear the men deny't. So that I say,
He has borne all things well ... 

A similar double-talk baffles Macduff when Malcolm receives him in England in 4.3, and is put to a different purpose as Ross delays telling of the murders of Macduff's wife and family.

The primary language of Macbeth, that of the thanes, divides into three distinctive usages: the empty elaboration of courtesy, the masked talk of potential conspirators, and, above all, the condensed approach to what is not that is most distinctive of the play. In total contrast is the Porter's prose; and another contrast, equally strong, is provided by the Weird Sisters' short-lined verse, variable in rhythm and in rhyme, elliptical and enigmatic in sense. They do not joke, and they are not bawdy, yet their weirdness has a comic edge to it which intensifies the sinister malice they engender. It was probably a particular tradition in their performances before the Commonwealth which led to their being still played by men after the advent of actresses, and they continued to be the province of clowns until the nineteenth century. The eighteenth century came to question the pertinence of their antics, and Kemble restrained what he found an affront to the play's dignity—his dignity as the hero. No doubt eighteenth-century 'Sisters' got out of hand, but male actors still sometimes take one or more of the parts, and I should record that a notably camp performance by the Second Witch at Stratford, Ontario, in 1971 was more effectively mysterious than any other I recall. It is not only in appearance that the Sisters present puzzles for performance, and any account of their language should recognize this.

Notes

6. See note on ll. 89-94 in his edn.
Criticism: Character Studies: George William Gerwig (essay date 1929)


[In the following excerpt, Gerwig interprets Lady Macbeth as a psychological “study in ambition,” albeit a self-sacrificing form of ambition that risks everything for another.]

Shakespeare's negative studies are as interesting and as valuable as his positive, for often the lessons of life may be learned quite as well from an example of what not to do as from an example of what to do.

Lady Macbeth in Macbeth represents the extreme of one form of temptation that may beset a woman, ambition; Cleopatra, the extreme of another, passion.

The life and crimes of Macbeth and his wife are so closely connected that the study of one necessarily embraces a study of the other. Here, as always, Shakespeare has differentiated his characters, and so successfully in this instance that Lady Macbeth will stand for all time as an example of one phase of woman nature, with all its intricacies of thought and feeling, while her husband, so close to her in every way, is yet a man in each of his processes as characteristically as she is a woman.

In its structure the drama of Macbeth is nearer the modern short story than anything else Shakespeare has written. In no respect is this more true than in the skill with which it presupposes the comparatively unimportant portions of Lady Macbeth's life—her girlhood, the wooing of Macbeth, the birth and death of her child—and takes up the story just at the artistic beginning of the soul's crisis.

As an introduction to the study of Lady Macbeth, and indeed of any one of Shakespeare's heroines, no one can do better than to read the proper chapter in The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines. These studies, in a remarkably sympathetic way, deal with the earlier life of each of the heroines up to the point at which the particular drama opens. They not only supply much additional data regarding the times, the circumstances of the play and the earlier relations between the actors, but they also help materially in understanding the development of the characters.

All those who attempt to enact the part of any of Shakespeare's characters not only learn the words, but strive, as fully as possible, to put themselves into the actual place of the particular character, living the part, in the scenes presented in the play, as well as in the days which precede or follow.

It is a comparatively simple task to present an incident in the middle of a human life. It requires, however, both an artist and a genius to mirror such an incident so that it will really be a cross-section of a life's vital history, reflecting alike not only the present status of the character development, but likewise suggesting how each character cause may be traced back to its origin. Each inevitable consequence may be foreseen, or at least understood and appreciated when it comes.

Macbeth and his wife Lady Macbeth are individually and jointly among the very keenest minds of their time. They stand high in the esteem of King Duncan to whom they are bound by ties both of blood and of
patriotism. King Duncan is a lovable, but not a strong monarch. He is kept on his throne almost entirely by the ability and the military genius of Macbeth, who is his leading general. The throne of Scotland, at this time, is not entirely hereditary, but elective from a certain group, of which Macbeth is the leading member. Neither he nor his wife, however, are content to rest their chance of promotion entirely upon their merits. They each feel keenly the weakness of the king and superiority of Macbeth. They keep harboring in their minds the desire for something which is wrong, until, as is always the case in such instances, their consciences are corrupted, and their characters utterly honeycombed with evil. They keep giving themselves, in imagination, to pictures of what might be, if the things which they know are right are ignored. So they first determine that if an opportunity comes to place Macbeth on the throne they will seize it. Then they contribute toward making such an opportunity, murder King Duncan while he is their guest and seize his throne. Neither Macbeth nor Lady Macbeth, however, have fully reckoned with the consequences of their evil action. They learn to their sorrow that the task of appearing innocent, while actually guilty, is one to which they are unequal. The tragedy is a story of the self-punishment of crime.

Shakespeare never wastes words, and least of all in *Macbeth*. Lady Macbeth is first introduced to us reading the latter portion of a letter she has just received from her husband, telling her of his meeting with the witches and of their prophesy that he is to be king. The letter, and Lady Macbeth's soliloquy which follows, describe Macbeth's character and interpret her own. They show us many things—that Lady Macbeth is the source of his mental strength and resolution, that they have talked over the situation of affairs in the kingdom, with all its possibilities, both those which may be depended upon to come unaided and those which may be forced to an issue. The extent to which the consciences of both have been undermined by harboring unlawful desires is evident. That Macbeth holds himself in readiness to be beguiled by the witches is made apparent by the fact that Banquo, who is present at the time, who is given by the witches equally alluring prophetic promises, but whose soul is too true to be corrupted by the virus which infected the self-weakened conscience of Macbeth, comes away from the identical encounter absolutely uncontaminated.

It is equally evident from the letter and Lady Macbeth's words that both she and her husband stand mentally committed to any action which will further their ambitious schemes. When any one has mentally consented to an unlawful action the committing of it only awaits a fitting opportunity.

This soliloquy, following the reading of the letter, gives us one of the best views we have of Macbeth, and indirectly of Lady Macbeth. She has analyzed this husband of hers to the last trace of character. She knows that he wants the throne more than he wants anything else in the world; she knows that, unaided, he will in all probability fail to secure it on account of the milk of human kindness in his heart and a remnant of conscience which makes him hesitate about doing a thing he knows is wrong. All her tenderness for her husband takes the form of a desire to do something for him. She makes, not the typical sacrifice of a woman, that of her body to the man she loves, but the greater sacrifice of her soul itself. She has been endowed with a regal imagination, along with superb and daring resolution. She wants this kingdom, not in any sense for herself, but for her husband. She has set her heart supremely upon this, thinking that she has counted the cost, but, woman-like, really seeing nothing between her wish and its fulfilment.

Ambition has laid its stealthy fingers upon her conscience. Yet it is the self-sacrificing ambition of a woman, rather than the selfish ambition of a man. It has benumbed her woman's sensitiveness so effectually that most readers take her words literally, assuming that they represent the normal manner in which her mind works. Instead she is constantly saying and doing things to herself which stimulate her to do things for her husband. She desires to do these things for him. She feels that they must be done, and be done by her, to further his success.

If her words and actions were really indicative of her usual mental and spiritual state, instead of the mistaken stimulus of a really disinterested purpose, she would indeed be the monster of cruelty and selfish ambition she is often pictured. She is instead the extreme example of a finely organized sensitive woman who, with no
possible thought of the consequences to herself, gladly places her all on the altar of service for her husband.

Time after time Lady Macbeth has gone over the situation—the deserts of her husband, the weakness of the king, the opportunity which *may* perhaps come to place her lord upon the throne. In imagination she has already signed and sealed with the blood of her soul the compact with Satan to do his bidding if he will but grant this boon, not for herself but for her husband. For her own selfish benefit she would probably hesitate to violate the lightest of the laws. But for her husband she is all too willing to lose even her soul forever.

So, when the opportunity of which she has dreamed, and for which she has prayed has actually come—as opportunities, good and bad ever come to those who court them, she is for the moment fairly crazed at the prospect of the possibilities that come with it.

The raven himself is hoarse,
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here;
And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty!

She thinks she realizes fully where she stands; she believes she has counted the cost; she declares herself ready to pay it, if she may but have this boon for her husband. The lines Shakespeare uses in making Lady Macbeth equal to the task of forcing her husband to murder King Duncan contain over thirty terms and phrases of darkest and direst association.

Macbeth's first words to his wife indicate that his mind, too, is filled with the possibilities of the opportunity which, thus far, has come without any guilt on their part:

Duncan comes here tonight.

But they also indicate that in his case no corresponding resolution has been taken. It is Lady Macbeth who comes to the point, who nerves him to action.

So he puts himself entirely in her hands—as she intended he should. It is not sufficient, moreover, that she point out for him the way. It is she, rather than the Thane, who must welcome the King, and at every turn, both before and after the murder, it is she who must be both thoughtful and resolute for both. All too well has she estimated the amount of the milk of human kindness in his nature. Left to himself he would never have taken the steps necessary to secure the crown. Between his conscience and his recognition of the inevitable consequences he would have hesitated. But his wife has determined, once for all, that he shall have the crown, and that she will pay whatever the penalty may be. So she holds him relentlessly to his portion of the task.

Nothing is more interesting, more significant, and often more dramatic in life than the way the same fact or situation will affect different persons. It is one of the most fascinating ways of studying the difference between objective and subjective life. One of these contrasts, pregnant with meaning, the dramatic effect of which an audience always grasps, is King Duncan's peaceful entrance under the stone archway of the castle of his kinsman. Confidingly and unconsciously he walks to his doom.
Lady Macbeth, speaking of the same spot had called them her battlements. But King Duncan says:

This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses.

And Banquo follows with one of those bits of nature-lore for which Shakespeare is forever famous.

Scarcely less fine, in the way of human contrasts, is the presentation of the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth at this point. The character of Lady Macbeth is often, and indeed usually, misinterpreted in two important particulars. She is charged with being both selfishly ambitious and cruel, because her words, on their face alone, seem to warrant such an interpretation. A woman, however, who is as selfishly ambitious and as cruel as Lady Macbeth is alleged to be, would simply act, without the necessity of stimulating herself to action either by words or by wine.

The history of Lady Macbeth's ambition, its beginnings, its full development and its consequences, is clear enough. The prize, however, had no value whatever for her. There is not a line in the play which indicates that Lady Macbeth desires that Macbeth have the throne because of any possible advantage to her. She is never shown either wishing for it on her own account or in the enjoyment of it. Lady Macbeth seeks the throne for her husband, and stands ready to sacrifice her very soul in order that he may have it, purely and solely from a woman's desire to give her husband the one thing in the world which he wants most.

It is mistakenly assumed too that she is naturally cruel. Nothing could be farther from the truth. No woman, cruel by nature, could suffer as she suffered in the final scenes of her life. The stimulation of cruelty is merely one of the prices she must pay, and which she stands ready to pay, in order to be able to present this much-desired gift to her husband. Macbeth is a tragedy of the inability to endure the consequences of crime.

Macbeth's soliloquy, which corresponds with Hamlet's famous soliloquy, gives not only the innermost elements of his nature but of all human nature in its struggle with temptation. No one is wholly good or wholly bad. The King is kind, good, innocent. The crime Macbeth is about to commit is a violation of all that he has heretofore held sacred in his life. He argues it all out with himself, as which of us has not, and feels that he can not acquiesce in his wife's determination. The game is not worth the candle. He craves the crown as much for himself as his wife does for him. But his life has taught him, as the life of man will, that the cost of crime and of violation of conscience must be paid. Lady Macbeth understands nothing of this. She has never had the same experience with the consequent results of the violation of right. She merely assumes that she will be able to pay the cost because she is willing to do so. That crime ever brings its own self-punishment is a proposition of which she is as yet ignorant.

The union between Macbeth and his wife is temperamentally an ideal one, for each is the complement of the other. The misfortune was that their joint lives were not consecrated to some holy end. Had their child lived it might have been different. Lady Macbeth has divined that her husband is hesitating, so she comes to strengthen his resolution. She has had to do this before; she will have to do it again. Her intuition, as well as her experience with, and thorough knowledge of men tell her how to go about the matter in the most effective way. Macbeth is proud, and justly proud, of his bravery; but it is physical, rather than mental or moral bravery, as is abundantly shown by what he says when confronted later by the ghost of Banquo. So Lady Macbeth appeals to his fear of seeming afraid.

To be the same in thine own act and valor
As thou art in desire?

How tender 't is to love the babe that milk's me;

Art thou afeard
I have given suck, and know
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.

Their babe is dead—yet she can say this! Her resources, and the relentless way in which she employs them, are simply appalling, unless we bear constantly in mind that it is not for herself, but for her husband that she is striving so hard.

Macbeth begins to yield; she assumes his consent, and he is at last forced into the crime in spite of all his scruples.

Macbeth has not a murderer's heart; he is already suffering more than his victim will, and this is only a prelude to the suffering which will come to him.

The necessity of taking the wine, which emboldens her, is one of the great proofs that Lady Macbeth is not of coarse fibre. If she had been brutal enough to act without the stimulus of wine the sleep-walking scene would have been impossible.

Macbeth has gone on his errand of murder, but has not dared to shut the door behind him. He hears, or thinks he hears, some one moving. He calls out, in a last hope of being interrupted. But Fate is pitiless and at length he strikes the blow which Lady Macbeth is waiting, trembling to hear. She has made all the preliminary arrangements, even to laying out the daggers. But she finds that she is not quite so strong as she supposed, for a fancied resemblance between King Duncan and her father keeps her from striking the blow with her own hand.

The reaction is upon them both at once. Macbeth is unnerved, perplexed, horrified, and Lady Macbeth can only for the moment echo her husband's half-coherent words. She is the first to recover, however, and the progress of her return to her former daring tone is one of the finest psychological studies in the language.

Macbeth has forgotten all his directions and has fearfully endangered their lives by bringing the daggers with him. They must be returned, and at once—but he is abjectly unequal to the task, and his wife assumes it. Then comes one of the most dramatic climaxes in literature. Macbeth is trembling, alone, shut up in his castle with the consciousness of his crime, and the outside world in the form of the tipsy porter comes suddenly, but relentlessly knocking for admission.

Lady Macbeth saves the day, as usual, and is by this time a miracle of cool, collected thinking. Her location of the knocking as at the south entry is one of the wonderful examples of the incisive way her mind works. The tragedy is full of examples of condensation, of appeals to the imagination, of those challenges for an emotional explanation which are of the very essence of art, many of them the finest in the entire realm of dramatic writing. It is not especially hard to kill a king, nor indeed to commit any crime. The real difficulty begins with the attempt to act naturally the part of one who is innocent, and continues with the task of carrying, day and night, the consciousness of the crime. Macbeth blunders at once and continually, adding the first of his long line of subsequent murders. Even the keen wit of Lady Macbeth fails under the ordeal and strikes a false note in regretting that Duncan's murder occurred in their house, as though that were the unfortunate feature. A moment later her swoon prevents Macbeth from betraying the entire state of affairs.

After all, we see Macbeth as king but once and even then it is but a sorry spectacle. The real tragedy is beginning to develop in different ways in the consciences of the pair. Once begun, Macbeth's moral disintegration proceeds apace. Another soliloquy shows us his abject fear of Banquo, as well as the determination to have him killed. So much has Macbeth suffered, and so completely is his mind obsessed with
the murder that he is constantly on the point of speaking out to the world. Lady Macbeth continually does her best to rally him, and succeeds while she is with him. But more and more he is coming to need support. He generously shields her, however, from the knowledge of his later crimes. That he disguises himself and is the third murderer seems apparent from a close study of the lines.

At the banquet scene he falsifies a desire to have Banquo present. His punishment comes swift and sure, for the ghost of Banquo appears in answer to his challenge. Macbeth's terror is abject and marks for us the degree of his previous suffering, the amount of sleep he must have lost. His words tell us that his courage is physical, not mental or moral. So intense is his agony that he talks openly of his secret. Lady Macbeth can do no more than hurry the guests off, leaving them to conjecture what they will. That Macbeth is the confessed murderer of King Duncan is now an open secret. When he forgets that his secret is a secret what must have been his state of mind?

The guests are gone at last, and the guilty husband and wife are alone. There is no chiding on Lady Macbeth's part. Each has failed in a way, and there is only a difference of degree between them. The things which creep into his speech show Macbeth's mental attitude—he keeps a spy in every house; he is always expecting to sleep, always failing. The two have the reckoning with themselves to make, and in addition to this, their reckoning with the world, which is becoming more and more clamorous.

In the first act the witches come to Macbeth; in the fourth he goes to them. Shakespeare gives us a group of the most powerful evil associations in all literature for the purpose of bringing down our hero at a stroke. As king of Scotland he is bound to stamp out witchcraft, yet we find him intimately associating with witches. And we hold him responsible for the company he keeps. In Shakespeare one only becomes the victim of fate in so far as one permits one's self to be victimized. The witches were merely the occasion, not the cause of Macbeth's downfall. Banquo had a soul which was immune.

Shakespeare shows us both his own fondness for children and Macbeth's utter oblivion to all the dictates of humanity by the murder of Macduff's family. How universal this law of the soul is, will be remembered from the events of the great war. The execution of Miss Cavell, and the outrages against women and children, instead of terrorizing the hearts of freemen, only served to steel their determination as this murder did the heart and arm of Macduff. This incident in the drama serves the double purpose of exhibiting the gratuitous cruelty of Macbeth and of providing an instrument for his punishment.

Both dramatically and psychologically the sleep-walking scene is the greatest scene of the play, if not the greatest in all Gothic literature. It would have been utterly impossible with a woman of coarser fibre. It shows both the depth and the helplessness of her despair. She lives over again, as she has countless times, each incident of the tragedy, and, like an x-ray, the artist reveals for us, through the broken lines that all can interpret, the innermost tragedy of her soul. She keeps ever washing the hands that will never be clean. The spots of blood are indelible. She hears once more the strokes of the bell which were to be the signal for the murder. She trembles again at the blood gushing from the wounds of her king. She bravely attempts to rally Macbeth. She returns, again and again to the task of cleansing the stain from her hands. She dies a thousand deaths before the great conqueror comes to end her sufferings. In scarcely more than a dozen lines she has given the greatest challenge to the imagination ever made in English, and preached the greatest sermon on the self-punishment of crime to be found in literature, sacred or profane.

The degree to which Macbeth must have suffered is measured by the effect produced upon him by the announcement of Lady Macbeth's death. She had been the life of his life. Yet so completely has his soul been lost to all finer sensibilities that the news of her death comes to him as a mere fact, leaving him to go to his doom without trace of emotion.
Life, dealt with through mere facts, either physical, mental or spiritual, is dull, cold and uninteresting. It is only as those facts are interpenetrated by ideals, and inspired, quickened and interpreted by the light of these ideals, that life has power, meaning and beauty.

What happens when the finer sensibilities of the soul are permitted to atrophy until they are so weak they almost die, is the basis of all tragedy of the life of the spirit. Shakespeare has shown it in the disintegration and downfall of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The world war shows what happens when a whole nation deliberately teaches its people to neglect and ignore their finer sensibilities of the soul, generation after generation, in pursuit of materialistic standards. No possible lesson is more needed by the world today than that taught by Shakespeare in his depiction for us of the manner in which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth lost their souls, unless it be the opposite and constructive lesson that the souls of men and of nations are aroused, quickened, strengthened and finally saved for themselves and for the world, by supplying to every one, day by day that soul-manna which will properly nourish, invigorate and energize the spirit. All reforms must begin first in the hearts of men. The proper training of the emotions and the sensibilities through the fine arts is the best method.

Lady Macbeth then, is a study in ambition, just as Cleopatra is a study of passion. There was the same temptation to misread one of the eternal laws of the spirit. The world is full of instances which seem to prove, to a superficial observer, that they prosper best who sin most. But Shakespeare shows us so plainly that he who runs may read—so forcefully as never to be forgotten—that man or woman, born with Anglo-Saxon conscience, pays to the last farthing the penalty fixed for every transgression. Nothing in life brings real happiness unless received under proper conditions. Live as we may, we are in no danger of forgetting Lady Macbeth with her sin-stained hands and her sleepless eyes. The supreme lesson that every crime brings inevitably its own reward is taught once and forever.

It is not for his graceful diction that we prize Shakespeare most, not for the magic of his numbers, the fire of his eloquence, the force of his logic, neither for the regal beauty of his poetry, nor for the crystal clearness of his prose, but because, next to the Saviour himself, he has taught the men and women of the world their greatest lessons in living.

**Criticism: Character Studies: Dolora G. Cunningham (essay date 1963)**


*In the following essay, Cunningham views Macbeth in terms of his repudiation of his own humanity and subsequent surrender to a compulsion for evil.*

At the closing of the fearful scene in which Macbeth decides to murder his king, he himself foresees the tragic distortion to which he has committed his human nature (I. vii. 79-82):

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I am settled and bend up
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.
Away, and mock the time with fairest show;
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.
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He has given his heart away to the worst, to that which is beneath human love. From now on, he is bound to a false appearance *and* to a false reality in which his moral sensitivity will be considered weakness and his callousness will be strength: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.” In order to do the deed and in order to live with the
accomplished fact, Macbeth must cut himself off from “that great bond” of nature: he must harden his heart and cease to feel as a man.

This defeat of human feeling, though surely an effect of Macbeth’s evil actions, seems to be also an important element in the tragic decision itself. No choice can be completed in action without the movement of the passions, and Macbeth, left to his own devices, says clearly that he has only the desire without the energy to move it (I. vii. 25-26): “… I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, …”¹ His desire for the kingship, he concludes, is impossible, primarily because he cannot work up the nonhuman feeling which is necessary to get what he wants. It is Lady Macbeth who supplies the emotional power that enables him to settle his will and so complete the act of moral choice that leads ultimately to the catastrophe. If it is this false choice that starts him toward the tragic end, it is the failure to turn back from the choice, to renounce it, that makes ruin inevitable (III. ii. 55): “Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.” Macbeth, shown in the beginning as having a genuine sense of human kindness, gradually so hardens himself in the custom of evil that he becomes eventually incapable of altering the pattern in which his very being and, for awhile, the total action of the play are fixed.

Appalled by the murder of Duncan, he is driven to seek ease for the tortured mind through deliberate attempts to take himself altogether out of the natural order² (III. ii. 49-50): “Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond / Which keeps me pale! …” He suffers so intensely his fall from where he belongs that he sets out to make himself at home in hell, among the mere dregs of this vault. Already he is sufficiently brutalized to desire universal destruction, if only he can feel safe and at peace:

But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer,
Ere we will eat our meal in fear and sleep
In the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly. ...

(III. ii. 16ff.)

To be set free of that great bond is to achieve the hardened heart that not only dares do more than becomes a man but can also support the non-human actions without fear or pain or remorse. Imagining, then, that further bloody deeds will inure him to such painful consequences, Macbeth resolves to strengthen himself in the custom of evil.

The murder of Banquo, undertaken partly from fear and resentment but also in the wild hope of destroying natural feeling (III. i. 47ff. and III. i. 16ff.), does not, of course, bring the desired peace. But it does strengthen him in the habit of evil to an alarming degree. Its immediate effect is so far to numb his conscience that he resolves to step up the program for making himself a hardened veteran of terrible deeds:

... My strange and self-abuse
Is the initiate fear that wants hard use:
We are yet but young in deed.

(III. iv. 142-144)

And so the ghost of Banquo is explained away as a sign of understandable stagefright, which can be easily overcome by further performances, as a beginning actor overcomes his initial nervousness through repeated appearances. The hardening of Macbeth’s nature is accompanied by a withdrawal from human kind; the divine light of reason in him darkens to the point where he is no longer in touch with others, and he is thrown back upon a horribly misdirected self-love where the self is conceived as the only reality (III. iv. 135): “For mine own good / All causes shall give way.” Even as he rededicates himself firmly to the worst, however, he remembers briefly that there is still an alternative course open to him:
More shall they speak; for now I am bent to know
By the worst means the worst. For mine own good
All causes shall give way. I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

(III. iv. 134ff.)

It is possible, he says, to turn back toward the “blessed time” he seeks to erase from memory; but he has already gone so far that returning is as difficult as—indeed more difficult than—to go on his now accustomed way. Where to begin with he had lacked the hard core of feeling for the murder of Duncan, he now lacks the energy to change a course of action he knows to be fatal to his eternal well-being. And he lacks this energy precisely because he has achieved the hard core of feeling; the custom of evil has fastened itself upon him, making it easier and apparently as desirable for him to continue in the groove of compulsive action, where what he does is determined by the will alone and must be done without being thought about:

Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,
Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd.

(III. iv. 139-140)

His will, formerly worked upon from without by Lady Macbeth's emotional appeals, is now bent from within, being moved to evil largely of its own accord, without the incitement of passion or the counsel of reason. He does not fear Macduff, for example, yet he will kill him anyhow from an excess of will in order to perfect himself in the habit of evil—to overcome the initiate fear by hard use—for he still suffers the horror of a divided self which M. Gilson has called the inner tragedy of the sinner's life. The decision not to turn back but rather to go ahead with the murder of Banquo commits Macbeth almost entirely to Lady Macbeth's philosophy of man as a beast-like creature of non-rational will: being a man means getting what one wants.

In a comprehensive view of the dramatic action, this decision not to change his course may be taken as the point of no return for Macbeth, as the point from which the catastrophe inevitably follows. His rejection of the briefly considered alternative is closely followed by his own accurate judgment that going on will further harden him, since the particular decision is in itself both the result of previous acts and a token of the hardening they have induced in his human faculties. In deciding not to repent at this time, he makes any later change of heart all the more unlikely, for, as he knows, what the theologically minded psychologists of another day called “long custome of sinne” is a notorious obstacle to repentance. To put off this basic discipline of the Christian life is a perilous putting off, as all Christendom knew full well, being continuously warned in sermons that they knew not at what hour their Maker would call them to the final accounting. Elizabethan moralists and psychologists moreover—as those of our own day talk about the unconscious and guilt feelings—frequently discuss the commonly accepted psychology of the hardened heart, in which the sinner becomes so fortified and confirmed in the custom of sin that it becomes a habit, corrupting one's human faculties and, as a popular sermon of the 1580's has it, “plunging one ever deeper in the stinking puddle of iniquitie. …” “For long custome of sinne taketh away all sense and feeling of sinne, and maketh as it were another nature unto us.”

There are several analogues to Macbeth's predicament in English tragedy before and during Shakespeare's career, the most famous being that of another murdering usurper in the prayer-scene of Hamlet. In considering the plight of his soul, Claudius does not repent, because he chooses not to detach his love from those things he has gained by his crime; although the fruit of Macbeth's crime has become dust and ashes, his energy has been exhausted in the service of that which he has wrongly desired, so that he, too, is unable to give up his winnings. They cannot as Claudius clearly sees, continue to eat their cake and be forgiven for having stolen it. In each case, the heart is so encumbered by the burden of its own fulfilled desires that it
cannot be turned away from them. These decisions of Macbeth and of Claudius are of essentially the same order and exert similar effects upon the quality of the following dramatic action. Claudius' failure to repent, like Macbeth's, hardens him to commit further evil actions and so contributes its important share to the developing tragic momentum. For if Shakespeare had made either of them repentant, then he would have decided to write a comedy—a play like *The Tempest*—and would have made other changes accordingly.

Macbeth's decision to go o'er into more blood quickly plunges him still deeper into the iniquity and corruption of another nature. By the end of the banquet scene, he has given himself to the powers of hell, in whose service he hopes to find ease, even if nature be poisoned at its source. Macduff must die “That I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies / And sleep in spite of thunder” (IV.i.84-85). He has come a long way from the defense of his manhood against Lady Macbeth's provocations. Now he will murder for no reason other than to habituate himself to the terrors of his corrupted state and make himself comfortable among them. He will murder Macduff in order to make his heart insensible to its own pain.

The very firstlings of his heart become the firstlings of his hand (IV.i.145ff.), without the review of thought; his will moves automatically, with increased swiftness and violence, toward the solipsistic condition he has set for his goal. The only consideration is a distorted personal consequence, and he becomes the creature of events determined by his previous actions and by their destructive effect upon his soul. Having thus abused his human faculties, he takes on the aspects of another nature, which, as Macduff says, is that of the devil himself:

_Not in the legions
Of horrid hell can come a devil more damn'd
In evils to top Macbeth._

(IV.iii.55ff.)

As the catastrophe draws near, there are various comments on Macbeth's shrunken and disordered condition:

_now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe
Upon a dwarfish thief.
.....Who then shall blame
His pester'd senses to recoil and start,
When all that is within him does condemn
Itself for being there?

(V.ii.19ff.)

Although he has become hardened in evil to a hellish degree, he continues to feel the horror of what he has done to himself—to suffer, that is, the inner tragedy of the sinner's life. The remnants of his human nature—for he never escapes it entirely—cause even the corrupted nature to condemn itself for being there. These lines of commentary upon Macbeth's inner conflict draw upon a long established and subtle psychology, as some words of St. Bernard on the subject easily demonstrate: “The ills the soul now suffers after sin do not replace that native goodness which is the original gift of the Creator, but they are super-induced on that goodness, and disturb it, deforming an order they can in no wise destroy.” The other nature that Macbeth has acquired through evil cannot dissolve the image of God in which all men are created. As he remains necessarily conscious of this true nature, he cannot forget either its capacity for excellence or his wilful destruction of that excellence. The only escape from this agonized consciousness—if the only method of recovery is rejected—would seem to be Lady Macbeth's flight into the dumb suffering of insanity. Presented in the beginning as fairly well advanced in hardness of heart and accustomed to the ways thereof, she is spared the anguish of Macbeth's awareness; yet in the end the bitterness of her mortally diseased nature kills her, and it might well be said that she dies of an unbroken heart: “I would not have such a heart in my
bosom for the dignity of the whole body” (V.i.61). The logical extreme of the hardened heart is insanity, the complete denial of one's identity as a human being.

Although Macbeth manages to loosen his human bonds, he never escapes them, and so toward the end he feels an appalling loneliness:

.....I have liv'd long enough. My way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; ...

(V.iii.20ff.)

Here once more is the comprehensive Shakespearian vision at work: the judgment of Macbeth as a murdering butcher stands firm—and he himself concurs in it—but the judgment includes also pity and fear for the lonely human being confronting his withered heart and counting up the awful losses of having loved for his own ends. Our pity and fear are further directed and enlarged by the method of direct comment to remind us, as in Hecate's reprimand of the Weird Sisters, that Macbeth's kind of loss is essentially a universal human experience:

And, which is worse, all you have done
Hath been but for a wayward son,
Spiteful and wrathful, who, as others do,
Loves for his own ends, not for you.

(III.v.10ff.)

Although he courts it ardently, he never does achieve the love of evil for its own sake, and he remains to the end conscious of all he has lost.

But the possibility of redeeming his losses is once more raised, and the extent of the damage he has inflicted upon himself can be measured by the careless rejection of the Doctor's advice to purge his own soul: “Throw physic to the dogs, I'll none of it!” (V.iii.47). The warning to pause and minister to his impoverished spirit passes by almost without notice as he taunts Heaven with the boast that he is immune from the fear of death. The pursuit of indifference has smothered but not removed his moral sensitivity; he has supped so full with horrors and the disposition to evil is so fixed in him that nothing can move him now, or almost nothing. The sight of Macduff does move him to a terrified remorse: his soul is too much charged already with this man's blood, and Macduff's very presence is a cruel reminder, for us as for him, of the greatness he has lost. Even now Macbeth is able to feel insufficient abhorrence for his sins against the human image to refuse at first to fight, as if he would renounce at last the long war to destroy it. But he has sabotaged the powers of his soul too effectively to move beyond the hopeless self-knowledge that is despair, and we feel that the weary decision to fight Macduff after all is determined almost automatically by what Macbeth now is. As he sees it in his blindness, there are only two alternatives open to him: continuance in his present way of life, henceforth in public disgrace, or death. But a third possibility of escape to heavenly forgiveness is freely offered by Macduff, who has asked Heaven to forgive even “this fiend” if he should escape Macduff's avenging sword (IV.iii). Macbeth, however, does not see that this magnanimous and profoundly charitable offer of life provides a last chance to recover what has been lost—or, perhaps more accurately, he sees the hard work of recovery as too tedious to be endured. Lear prays at the end for Cordelia's life that all sorrows may be redeemed, but here the opportunity to live and redeem his losses is repugnant to the habitual torpor of Macbeth's sick heart. Not to fight Macduff means that he must live on, and he has lived long enough.
The whole point of Macbeth's desperate state is enforced by the quality and position of Macduff in the latter part of the play, as the abnormality of Macbeth's response to the Witches is partly defined by Banquo's reasonable attitude in the opening scenes: Banquo and Macduff dramatize what ought to be in the circumstances—and this is surely Banquo's function in the second witch scene (I.iii), however one may view his later development. The shaping of Macduff as an even more important normative contrast begins with his flight to England to seek support from the saintly King Edward against the instruments of darkness who guide Macbeth. Macduff is described as “noble, wise, judicious”, and as his departure is the first positive action toward freeing Scotland from tyranny, it is also the beginning of his dramatic movement toward direct conflict with the hero.

The following stages in this development include the memorable view of Macduff’s “pretty ones” in action (IV.ii.), which rapidly enlists our sympathy with Macduff; Malcolm's test of Macduff's integrity (IV.iii), which ends with the rightful heir to the throne placing the sacred enterprise against the usurper under Macduff's direction; and Macduff’s fully human response to the reported slaughter of his family (IV.iii). By this stage of the action, Macduff stands out clearly as a man who has acted nobly and wisely for the common good, as a character whose dramatic stature has been skillfully developed in recent scenes so that the remaining action is shaped by the conflict between himself and Macbeth. But these scenes, including the moving exhibition of Macduff's grief, have a good deal more than superficial value in organizing the last part of the play for the restoration of order, and the form of the conflict has significance beyond increasing our horror of Macbeth's cruelty: the single state of man which the hero has destroyed in himself is dramatically rendered in the characterization of the antagonist.

The news of the high price he has paid for acting nobly in a brutal world, anchors Macduff's grief firmly to a deeply felt principle of what is proper to man. When Malcolm exhorts him to dispute like a man the loss of those who were most precious to him, he insists, first of all, upon the importance of feeling as a man should feel, and he says that to feel as a man is to be deeply aware of the importance of human beings in themselves and to each other:

I shall do so;
But I must also feel it as a man.
I cannot but remember such things were
That were most precious to me. ...

(IV.iii.220ff.)

In this carefully prepared scene, Macduff exhibits a firm allegiance to his human ties and a beautifully ordered capacity for feeling rightly in the circumstances; his response shows how a man ought to feel and emphasizes the importance of feeling humanly.

The tragic movement of the play is illuminated by the ennobled humanity of Macduff as well as by the horrible consequences of Macbeth's repudiation of his human role. It is precisely Macduff's capacity for feeling as a man which the hero has set out to destroy in himself, and a frightening measure of his success can be taken from his response to the death of Lady Macbeth. The almost complete failure to respond emotionally to his wife's death is a striking contrast to Macduff's attitude toward the loss of his family. The quality of Macduff's response renders concretely the proper human feeling which Macbeth has abandoned; when considered beside the weary “She should have died hereafter” (V.v.18ff.), it gives a dramatic reference point for judging the desperateness of Macbeth's condition. The event seems little more than another proof of the meaninglessness of life, an occasion for lacerating himself with his own hopelessness. He not only suffers from an inability to feel for others, but he is also fundamentally unable to feel for himself, to care what happens to him; he has lapsed into indifference, even to his most intimate concerns. Macbeth's inability to feel as a man is a concomitant of the hardening of the heart to which, from the decision to kill Duncan onward, he
has deliberately subjected himself. The custom of evil has so damaged his human faculties that he lacks the energy to move in his own vital interests.

The encounter with Macduff presents a mirror in which Macbeth sees with awesome clarity the state of his own soul. Since the antagonist's character has been dramatically formed on the human principles whose violation has led to the hero's ruin, it is altogether appropriate that Macduff should be the focus of this final vision. Their climactic meeting embodies the tragic conflict between what Macbeth should be and what he is, and presents in compressed form the entire tragic process: the attempt to destroy one's humanity must necessarily end in one's own destruction. Faced with a last opportunity to seek grace to save himself, Macbeth can only repeat the habitual pattern of rejection and going o'er, to which he is now a slave. Even in the naturalistic framework of modern psychology, the disorganized personality cannot by its own unaided efforts handle chaotic feelings, whose pressure must generally be relieved by therapy before the mind can assume normal control. As construed within this play the human person, like the human society, cannot function effectively without sharing in the supernatural energy which is grace; and Macbeth, for whom "renown and grace is dead", is accordingly unable to use his mind for the urgent task of restoring himself to working order. The self-inflicted hardening of his nature has raised a deliberate obstacle to grace, so that the understanding is darkened and the affections frozen, and the man feeds upon himself. It is this failure to alter perverted feeling and turn back in the right direction, as defined by Macduff's attitude and by Macbeth's own awareness, that makes the tragedy inevitable.

The inability to overcome the surrender to evil and to cope with its consequences is the fundamental tragic pattern of Macbeth, as I think it to be, in varying ways, in Shakespearian tragedy generally. The evil he chooses and its consequences are outside Macbeth's control to the extent that his reason is darkened and his affections hardened by the choice. The course of evil is likewise beyond the capacity of good men to control, except as they are enlightened and strengthened by the powers above, in whom Malcolm and Macduff place their faith, thus resolving the problem of evil with the traditional Christian answer. Evil, consisting as it does of the non-reasonable, is incalculable both to the evil-doer and to his victims, and cannot be dealt with by purely reasonable means—as those of us who recall Hitler's mad reign know full well. Macbeth makes his spirit inaccessible to the light of grace, as do practically all of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, in their various ways. If they had not done so, they would not finally be tragic, and the plays would not be tragedies, but would belong rather with the group often called romances—Winter's Tale, Cymbeline, The Tempest—in which the threatened catastrophe is forestalled by the working of grace in potentially tragic circumstances and by the consequent ordering of otherwise destructive events to a peaceful resolution. Such a comparison suggests that a helpful distinction might be drawn between Shakespearian comedy and tragedy in terms of the effective operation of grace as one method of organizing the happy ending and its rejection or delay as a formative principle of the tragic ending. Although several critics have observed the themes of forgiveness and mercy at work in the romances, very little attention, to my knowledge, has been paid to their implication for our understanding of the significance of tragic and comic form in Shakespeare's work.

The hardening of the heart against itself that covers Macbeth with irrevocable loss, is, I should judge, a formative element in Shakespearian tragedy generally; and it is so at least in the sense that a perversion of human faculties accompanies, in one way or another, the irrational action which sets the tragic events in motion, and makes them progressively less subject to peaceful resolution. Although I should not, of course, argue that Claudius' inability to repent accounts for the tragic outcome of Hamlet, still his decision not to alter his course makes it all but impossible for the hero to set things right. There are explicit comments on the steadily increasing helplessness of Lear and Othello to control the deepening disorders which their mistaken choices have inaugurated, and which they renounce too late to avoid the tragic results. And, finally, there is an important resemblance between the tragic pattern of Antony and Cleopatra and Shakespeare's use of the psychology of the hardened heart in Macbeth. Unless one accepts the distorted modern view of the play as a sermon on the glories of a noble love transcending everything in this world and the next, one sees that Antony and Cleopatra are presented as being so accustomed to the worship of sensual love as an absolute that
they are unable to change this obviously fatal allegiance, that, in fact, they would rather lose everything than change their ways. The tragic outcome of *Antony and Cleopatra* is as firmly shaped as that of Macbeth by the failure to alter misguided affections and destructive choices. Both plays end in tragedy because the heroes and the heroine give their hearts completely to those things (worldly glory, worldly love) which, however attractive, are defined in the plays as unworthy of such ultimate allegiance and as destructive of the proper state of man, and because they fail to turn back their loyalties to that which is considered worthy of being loved by human beings.

**Notes**

4. Cf. G. R. Elliott, *Dramatic Providence in Macbeth* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 142-143, *et passim*. Professor Elliott's argument that the possibility of repentance is a major source of dramatic suspense seems to overlook the dramatically established point that Macbeth is able to view the possibility only remotely; his inability to consider repentance seriously would serve therefore to intensify the tragic movement of the action rather than to raise doubts as to the outcome.
6. Apart from Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* and such imitations as *A Knacke to Knowe a Knave* (1594) and *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* (1598), interesting examples of tragic impenitence are to be found in Nathaniell Woodes, *The Conflict of Conscience* (1581) and in Barnabe Barnes, *The Divil's Charter* (1607).
7. From *In Cant. Cant.*, 82, 5; as translated by E. Gilson, p. 295.
9. In an essay on “The Characterization of Shakespeare's Cleopatra” (*Shakespeare Quarterly*, Winter, 1955), I interpret the final act as being shaped by Cleopatra's unsuccessful—hence tragic—attempt to change to a better way of life. The three comments which have appeared in later issues of the journal (Winter of 1956, Summer of 1957, Summer of 1958) treat the Christian ethos as if it were only a simple-minded list of commandments, and Shakespeare's play as if it were only a narrow glorification of romantic love. Two recent books encourage the hope that this fashionable modern view of the play may receive a needed examination: Franklin M. Dickey's *Not Wisely But Too Well* (The Huntington Library, 1957), Chs. X-XIII, presents historical evidence for the interpretation of *Antony and Cleopatra* as a tragedy of irrational desire; and Brents Stirling, *Unity in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Columbia Univ. Press, 1956), Ch. X, discusses the play as a combination of satire and tragedy.

**Criticism: Character Studies: Peter Ure (essay date 1974)**

In the following essay, Ure follows the development of Macbeth's character throughout the play, suggesting that he is a tragic and sympathetic, rather than evil, figure.

Who then shall blame
His pester'd senses to recoil and start,
When all that is within him does condemn
Itself, for being there?

_Macbeth, v.ii.22-25_

In the three previous tragedies the protagonists are faced with situations which are not, essentially, their own creation. Hamlet and Othello both seem to themselves to have dread commands imposed upon them, the one to avenge his murdered father, the other to punish his faithless wife; even Lear, although his conduct provides a kind of excuse, is placed at the mercy and ordering of others. All of them have to wrench their behaviour and force their souls into reinterpreting roles which they did not initiate. But Macbeth has to nerve himself to perform a task which he invented for himself in the first place; the seed, it appears, grew in his own mind and not anyone else's. Shakespeare shows us both the genesis and the fulfilment of what begins as a stretch, almost a sudden physical shudder, and then grows. Macbeth has an extra load to lift—everything must begin with him and must be shaped and created by him. The play is the most exhausting and violent of them all, and much of this exhaustion springs from the feeling that Macbeth has to create everything step by step as he goes along out of what is at first a mere chaos of revolt, obscure promises, and lost names. There is a kind of analogy between Macbeth's struggles and the struggles of the artist, the Michelangelesque hewing out of the perfected shape resident in the marble block, or Yeats's struggles with tenth-rate scrawls as he works toward the complete realization of the hidden image. Perhaps this is one reason why we feel Macbeth is, in H. S. Wilson's words, 'a poetic person'.

Macbeth is poetical not only because of the poetry of his utterance, and not only because of 'his power to grasp fully and concretely what is happening to himself', but also because he voluntarily puts his hand to the work of creating his own role and situation and seems constantly to be making claims, though of a blasphemous kind, to reorder Nature and Nature's germens into his own patterns. There are parts of the play in which Macbeth can be seen as evilly parodying the artist's entitlement to a creative function analogous to that of the Creator himself, just as Milton's Satan is a dark antithesis of the Almighty, establishing an infernal kingdom and begetting hideous angels.

The Witches rhyme powerfully upon his name in the first scene: it is the climax of their chant—'There to meet with Macbeth'. But Macbeth begins the play by acquiring an additional name, 'Thane of Cawdor', and it is this circumstance, perhaps more than anything else, which starts Macbeth off imagining himself as a murderer—that long exercise of the imagination in which he tries to see himself in the role of murderer and tries to work himself up to it. The smallness and apparent insignificance of this germ contrasts with the lengthy and explicit imposition of his task upon Hamlet by the Ghost, with Iago's 'evidence', or with the total reversal of circumstance that forces Lear into unaccustomed self-examination and imaginative recreation of himself. Macbeth, beginning with this tiny speck, is observed accreting everything else around it. Duncan's rewarding Macbeth with this title is indeed the only event in the second scene of the play in the sense of being the only thing that that scene contributes to the forward movement of the plot. The scene itself is a curious combination of orderly calm and deliberation with wild, baroque disorder and gesture, like waves breaking at the foot of a monument. The antithesis of foul and fair, of discomfort swelling from comfort, which runs through the language and metaphor, is thus supported by the larger design of the scene. This, at any rate, is the impression that the scene gives on the stage; Duncan is confined to the spot, listening, mostly silent, yet central and in control as the news breaks upon him; the first speech of the bleeding Captain culminates in the first presentation of Macbeth as the man of blood who

Like Valour's minion, carv'd out his passage,
Till he fac'd the slave;
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

(i.ii.19-23)

Before the next wave of verbal and pictorial violence can be hurled against Duncan, the Captain collapses, and Ross, after a pause of intensifying suspense, carries it to a greater height than the first had reached. In the manner of speech of both Ross and the Captain there is a kind of dramatic, attention-calling excess and excitement which seems consciously to build up to the ‘happy’, victorious ending. The violence of the waves is not entirely real; they are waves in a story, in a Senecan messenger's speech. They express, like baroque art, a contrived disorder, and I do not therefore feel that we need take too seriously the image of Macbeth as the man of blood which is presented in them. Unseaming enemies from the nave to the chops is a violence which belongs to the descriptive facility of the messenger rather than very closely to Macbeth himself, and there is not really very much in this scene which leads us to qualify the epithets of ‘noble’ and ‘brave’ (somewhat neutral ones in the circumstances—it was the least they could say) which are applied to him in it. But the scene does of course present blood and disorder, even if it is firmly controlled and set in a frame. The act of order which emerges from it at the end, Duncan's

No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive
Our bosom interest.—Go pronounce his present death,
And with his former title greet Macbeth.

(i.ii.65-68)

concludes the episode, seals up the revolt as something over and done with; Macbeth, on behalf of Duncan's order, has suppressed the revolt, and Macbeth gets his reward, and that is the end of it.

Yet, with an irony which the imagery of this scene has already sufficiently introduced to us, from this comfortable return to normality swells the whole subsequent storm. When the Witches greet Macbeth with the equivocal titles, his ‘start’ and ‘fear’, on which Banquo comments, may be—and usually are—taken as an indication that something has been germinating in Macbeth's mind, and yet we cannot be really certain that Shakespeare intends us to understand this: it is perhaps a bit naïve of Banquo to suppose (as he seems to) that Macbeth ought to receive the incredible invocation with a beam of satisfaction—would not the most virtuous of men be somewhat taken aback, sense a threat or an evil joke, at being greeted in a fashion which ‘stands not within the prospect of belief’, at having his destiny sketched out in a way which seems so wildly unlike probability? The doubt at any rate, if at all valid, merely underlines Shakespeare's intention of showing us the ‘something’ in its most microscopic, its barely identifiable, germinal state and emphasizing how much the vision of himself as a murderer and a king, which he is shortly to start building up, is Macbeth's own imposition upon himself. Shakespeare shows us the building process from the very beginning when we only suspect, and cannot be certain, like Macbeth himself, that there is something there to be seen. For it is when the Witches keep one part of their word of promise to his ear that Macbeth really begins to face the possibility of nerving himself to his role, to labour with the unspeakable possibility. The new title of Thane of Cawdor comes up again, proudly borne in, as it were, by Ross and Angus, and Macbeth's response is unequivocal: he wants to be able to hope. The title now bears on its underside the hidden promise of the ‘greatest’ (for the name of Cawdor is growing in a sinister way since it left Duncan's hands in the previous scene), and such are the circumstances that Macbeth perhaps might be excused for coupling it with a yet greater title, were it not that Shakespeare has very strikingly contrasted Banquo's responses with Macbeth's and put into Banquo's mouth a direct warning to Macbeth that the two names must be kept separate (i.iii.120-6). Again we are returned to Macbeth's nature, to the fertile ground there. And then finally we have the first soliloquy, the first painful symptom of germination. His heart thumps, his skin crawls; the new name, so proudly and orderly handled by others, as it pressess upon him (‘I am Thane of Cawdor’) confuses his sense of his own identity, and leaves him momentarily nameless and robbed of action, wholly intent upon something that exists only in
his imagination. This soliloquy is as near as Shakespeare could get, within the limits imposed by the extreme articulacy of his form, to portraying the first surge of an idea in the moment of its birth. Beside it Brutus' soliloquy (Julius Caesar, ii.i.61-69), with which it naturally invites comparison, seems like a commentary upon it, rather than an actualization of even faintly comparable power. It is the birth of Macbeth's vision of himself as a murderer that we are watching; it is physically disorganizing, 'against the use of nature', 'horrible', because of its own essential horror or because it is being resisted; it is formless because it has not yet been properly born or because Macbeth cannot bear to look at it properly. In each case the second alternative points at a determinate, basic fact that Shakespeare wants us to know about Macbeth: that he is not a man to whom such a vision can be other than revolving, fit for instant rejection. Yet the internal events leading up to it have been revealed in such carefully calculated glimpses that we know that some element in Macbeth is alone responsible for what another element in him struggles to suppress. It seems the most desperately private moment anywhere in the plays, if we except the last soliloquy of Richard III; Macbeth, like Richard, is in communion with nothing but the struggling elements within himself, whereas Lear's or Othello's or even Hamlet's soliloquies tend to become invocations to outside powers (including the audience) or somewhat objectified versions of themselves. This is perhaps because we are taken further back into Macbeth's history than we are into that of any of the other characters, and this is because the role is created by the protagonist's own nature in a more fundamental sense than is the case with Hamlet and Othello or even with Lear. Such a condition cannot last long, and Macbeth falls away from it into a kind of Stoic apathy—'Perhaps I don't need to do anything to make it happen';

... chance may crown me,
      Without my stir.

And his next remark is, in the context, an almost pointless aphorism:

Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.

Certainly nothing has been decided; Macbeth must of course dissemble his 'rapt' condition (i.iii.150-1); the speech to Banquo may be a feeler towards a sinister alliance, but Banquo (unless he has here momentarily become a relic of Holinshed's Banquo) doesn't recognize it as such.

As a potential murderer, in the next scenes Macbeth struggles to behave in what he considers an appropriate way, one suited to an idea of the role. This is an effort of the imagination, which endeavours to overlay conscience, which in Macbeth is itself imaginative. He composes passages about the role as though to verbalize the vision of himself as murderer were a means of countering that other impulse (and all the powerful reasons as well) which say that he ought not to undertake the role at all. We have the first of these passages just after Duncan has bestowed another of his fatal titles:

The Prince of Cumberland!—That is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires!
Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

(i.iv.48-52)

This language of rhyming invocation is not Macbeth's usual style; these monosyllables move with an uneasy formality which half-suggests the stage villain shrouding his face melodramatically in his cloak. It is a gesture, the striking of an attitude, whose unreality is immediately emphasized by Lady Macbeth's intimate account of a much more complex Macbeth (i.v.15-30) who needs her inspiriting before he can genuinely feel himself in the role of murderer to which in this speech he is only pretending. Lady Macbeth's own invocation
is quite different and carries instant conviction as having all her will and imagination poured into it. Her prayer to the demonic spirits signalizes her passionate wish to become an instrument wholly adapted to getting the murder done, for her nature to be transformed and become as cruel as the deed; there is to be complete consonance between performer and performance, an integrity so absolute as to make her the human equivalent of the murdering ministers themselves, who are evil by metaphysical device. Her prayer, as the play goes on to reveal, is not wholly answered; but it shows that she, unlike Macbeth, commits herself completely to the task, allowing the nature of the deed itself to determine her own nature; the role shall be her master, infusing her with its own life and driving out her own. Lady Macbeth does not attempt to excuse or justify the deed, or indeed to look at it at all; she simply allows its evil, which is clearly realized by her, to take charge. This is, as it were, the degree of commitment to which Lady Macbeth would like to pledge her husband as she looks forward to pouring her spirits into his ear and chastising him with the valour of her tongue. To effect it, she must remove the impediments which she has described in the soliloquy about his character, the essential human kindness, the ‘fear’ (perhaps more rightly to be called ‘scruple’—we must allow for her point of view), the ambition that won’t be logical, all that essentially normal mixture of good and bad which earlier had allowed Macbeth to rest in

If Chance will have me King, why, Chance may crown me,
Without my stir.

And when Macbeth enters, for what in the play is his first meeting with her, we see that he is as uncommitted as ever, that he has scarcely moved a step by the end of the scene from his position at the end of the first scene with the Witches when he says to Banquo, as he now says to his wife, no more but ‘We will speak further’. In spite of her entirely specific references to ‘this night’s great business’, he is remarkably reticent; but that he makes no gesture of repudiation also suggests that he sees in Lady Macbeth a figure of the Chance that may crown him ‘without his stir’: ‘Leave all the rest (apart from behaving with the smiling countenance of a host) to me’, she says; Macbeth has from the first felt that if he could just let it happen without having to commit himself to doing it, that would be a tolerable way.

There is not much evidence that Macbeth can play even the minor part of smiling host that Lady Macbeth has set down for him. She takes it on herself in i.vi, and Duncan remarks upon his absence with surprise. What is most surprising about the soliloquy in the next scene is the way in which it ‘jumps the life to come’, that is to say disregards the possibility of retribution and punishment for sin in another world. In facing the act of murder Macbeth considers its consequences, that it is hard to ‘get away with murder’, but the traditionally supreme sanctions are dismissed right at the beginning:

Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all-here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We’d jump the life to come.

(i.vii.2-7)

The remark is strangely impersonal, as though it were the fruit of Macbeth's observation of what really motivates men: they are afraid to commit murder because it sets a bad example of which they themselves may in time become the victims. The thought of the deed itself no longer inspires the physical horror which it once aroused. It is rejected because it breaks a social bond which keeps the individual safe from others. Then Macbeth thinks of his obligations as kinsman, subject, and host—another series of social bonds, which argue to the same end. Then he turns from himself to think of Duncan and his virtues. The great image with which the passage ends is not an image of supernatural vengeance but of all humanity weeping with pity for Duncan. The soliloquy rises through prudential considerations to an overwhelming expression of Macbeth's social and
moral sensibility. The idea of murder occupies his whole mind, is received there, and can be defined; and this shows how hugely the original minuscule seed of i.iii has grown. The idea of himself as murderer is no longer something ‘fantastical’, but real enough to be rejected, so that the soliloquy serves the double purpose of showing how his imagination has shaped what was once shapeless and how he cannot commit himself to what he now sees does really exist in his mind as an ‘intent’. Macbeth from now on is someone conscious of a task, even though he rejects it; he is in communication with his role as a living thing in his imagination. It is the paradoxical effect of this soliloquy, which so cogently expresses Macbeth's reasons against murder, to make us feel that he is nearer to enactment of it than he has ever been before. He is seeing murder, after all, as an act within the context of the life he participates in, the life of society, with its moral and kingly bonds, its logic of the bad example, and its human grief, and not as something unidentifiably shocking and nameless. It has changed from a ‘horrid image’ to ‘th' assassination’. If this is now the condition of Macbeth's sensibility, it is less surprising that his wife, in the ensuing passages, is able to commit him. He does not try to bring into his communion with her the broader aspects of his moral sensibility or ‘nature’ (although, if her soliloquy in i.v.16-25 is any evidence, she may be said to know about them and to calculate accordingly), but his refusal draws upon the area, his life and position in society, upon which his soliloquy was centred:

We will proceed no further in this business:
He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people …

(i.vii.31-33)

In a sense, this makes it easier for her, for all she has to do is to replace Macbeth's image of himself as host, kinsman, and subject with another human image—the ‘man’ who dares, who takes what he wants, and is the more the ‘man’ because he does so. When Macbeth says,

I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none,

it is man defined as he defined himself in the soliloquy that he is offering. But as she overwhelms him with her will and disposes of the practical objections, it is her definition of ‘man’ that he finally takes with complete acceptance when he cries:

For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males.

(i.vii.73-75)

The step from one definition to the other is not so very great (most societies, indeed, seem to be able to recognize both without notable difficulty, especially if they are, like Macbeth's, militarily inclined). By means of this trick Macbeth is committed to seeing himself in terms appropriate to the enactment of murder. His last words in the scene have that hollow and slightly melodramatic ring which characterized ‘Stars, hide your fires!’—they consciously override with a Senecan declamatory effect the more complex poetry of the Macbeth who conceived the ‘Pity’ image, of the Macbeth whom the audience knows can be described, in language which objects to this new, stiff bravado, as ‘too full of the milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way …’:

Away, and mock the time with fairest show:
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.

(i.vii.82-83)
In the murder scenes Shakespeare specially exploits these varieties of speech.

Now that he has come to it, the Macbeth of the soliloquy about the dagger is the Macbeth to whom murder is a horrid image, born out of some atavistic place within himself in a context of lost identity and supernatural soliciting. It is obvious that this Macbeth, the one who sees ghosts and whose hair stirs with horror, has not been overridden by the ‘man’ in either of its senses. Yet it is against this Macbeth that Lady Macbeth's man screws up his courage, and the language of the speech passes insensibly into another mode. Macbeth works himself up into the mood of ‘I will be as wicked as I ought to be’ in words that are designed to have something of the inspiring function of an alarm to battle, the cry before the charge.

Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep: Witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's off'rings; and wither'd Murther,
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost.—Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my where-about,
And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it.—Whiles I threat, he lives:
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.

(ii.i.49-61)

This is the Macbeth who deliberately composes about himself, with, as he recognizes, ‘words’ consciously ordered, as though he were a kind of poet. The scene is carefully set and objectified and curiously distanced: the abstract ‘Murther’ is amplified in controlled parenthesis with his attendant wolf, who is, in a quite elaborate conceit, a sentinel whose watchword is his regular howl; and Murther is further illuminated with the rare, classical, poeticizing image of Tarquin, an image amplifying the idea of might, breathless silence, and striding evil. He invokes the earth, as formerly he had invoked the stars, and concludes his poem with an objective vision of himself in which he is assimilated to the figure of Murther playing his part in a scene which must uphold him by being appropriately set. Yet the poem is not entirely satisfactory to Macbeth, does not quite tip him over the edge, and he covers the moment by leaving the stage with another of those stretched, resounding declamations:

Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to Heaven, or to Hell.

(ii.i.63-64)

It seems that this passage is Macbeth's method for making the task bearable to himself; he can just reach it, sufficiently narrow the gap between assumption and enactment of the role, adequately prick the sides of his intent, by using this spur and raising himself on these stilts of art. But it is a very precarious achievement recognized as such even in the moment of its attainment, while its artificiality, its conscious and deliberate formality and single vision, can be seen merely to put in abeyance, without abolishing, the Macbeth who is more complex, and much harder to satisfy.

This is the Macbeth we see after the murder, his artificially stimulated ‘strength’ unbended (ii.ii.44) and his ‘constancy’ (ii.ii.67) fled. The deed has become again a ‘horrid image’, but much worse than before because it is now completely projected and actualized; Macbeth's imagination of rejection works hard upon all its circumstances, which are raised in his mind to symbols of retributive alienation from the ordinary life of man,
praying, or sleeping, or washing his hands. As he faces his deed in retrospect, there is a specially vivid intercommunion between his inward self and the part he has played, but it is not really different in kind, only in degree, from what obtained before, when he was contemplating the deed in prospect with the ‘nature’ of the true Macbeth, not the Macbeth who deliberately assimilated himself to Murther in order to get the deed done. That posing and attitudinizing Macbeth, a development of Lady Macbeth's ‘man’, falls away at a touch and leaves the Macbeth who, like Hamlet or Brutus continually ‘thinks’ before and after.

The murder of Duncan, of course, condemns Macbeth in realms that range beyond his characterological pattern. What to him is a horrid image is elsewhere a subversion of the natural order, which in time reasserts itself and brings his punishment. This awe-inspiring process is greater than Macbeth, but it is a process rather than a person, even though it expresses itself first through storms and maddened horses and finally through such equally functional personages as Malcolm and Macduff. It is vital to the total effect and memorability of the play and has been properly emphasized by the commentators. But Macbeth himself still strives to live as something more hopeful and vital than a condemned man awaiting the end; although everything he now is dwells, in the audience's knowledge, beneath that dark shadow, and colours our apprehension of him, he concentrates a special kind of attention by unfolding, in further story, the relationship between his inward self and his deeds.

The murder of Banquo, although the story of the episode in all its details is quite a different one, seems to show the same pattern of character in Macbeth as the murder of Duncan. The soliloquy (iii.i.47-71) counterparts the ‘If it were done …’ soliloquy. Macbeth weighs the deed responsively, considering the relation between himself and his victim; just as his thoughts were once concentrated on murder in relation to his social position as host and kinsman, so now they link it with his kingly position, particularly as the begetter of a royal line. Rejected, as it was formerly, or accepted, as it is here, murder is something that can be thought about in relation to the self as a course of conduct which may disadvantage or advance him, ensure his safety among men, or rob him of men's golden opinions. Both soliloquies are the words of a man who wants to keep what he has got: his safety (common to both), respect, royal position, an idea of himself as an integrity, a creature whose acts are meaningful, not self-cancelling. They give contrary answers to the same question: will murder achieve such ends? And yet both have a quality much less constricted than this description implies, which is peculiarly Macbeth's: it expresses itself in his free-hearted recognition of his victims' virtues and in the way in which each speech rises to a glimpse of religious myth ('heaven's cherubim', 'mine eternal jewel / Given to the common enemy of man'). Because it entertains the thought of murder as a possible means to an end, Lady Macbeth, as we have seen, had not found it too difficult to replace the more fully human image of the self with her version of what it means to be a man. There is a similar transition here in the Banquo episode when Macbeth puts it to the Murderers: are they merely men, as the catalogue has it, or are they the kind of ‘man’ Macbeth wants, the kind that will strike secretly at their enemies? Yet Macbeth, as his conversation with Lady Macbeth (iii.ii) makes clear, is still the haunted victim, whose frame is shaken by terrible dreams and whose mind is full of scorpions; the definition of safety passes insensibly from being safe on his throne to being saved from horrid images. And again he covers this up by a formalization of imagined murder, composing with conscious art a passage about the murder of Banquo which has many resemblances in feeling and style to his ‘poem’ about the murder of Duncan:

Then be thou jocund. Ere the bat hath flown
His cloister'd flight; ere to black Hecate's summons
The shard-born beetle, with his drowsy hums,
Hath rung Night's yawning peal, there shall be done
A deed of dreadful note …

Come, seeling Night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful Day,
And, with thy bloody and invisible hand,
Cancel, and tear to pieces, that great bond
Which keeps me pale!—Light thickens; and the crow
Makes wing to th' rooky wood;
Good things of Day begin to droop and drowse,
Whiles Night's black agents to their preys do rouse.
Thou marvell'st at my words: but hold thee still;
Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.

(iii.ii.40-44, 46-55)

This is primarily an invocation to Night to aid the accomplishment of the murder, as he had previously conjured Earth to be silent during the murder of Duncan. But the invocation serves him by objectifying the moment and giving him control over his restless mind. Calling forth a dark enchanter's power, it sets the scene for an act which will, he hopes, assure his safety, and create an illusion that he stands at the centre and controls his fate. By formally signalizing his dedication to the murder of Banquo, it is meant less to chill our blood than to show us Macbeth freezing his doubt-ridden soul into an attitude of mastery, a fixed shape of gloomy terror that will dominate the event and make it run his way.

His experiences after Banquo's murder force Macbeth back into his old condition of stultified horror. The order ‘whole as the marble, founded as the rock’ that he has tried to create he continues to uphold in the banquet, struggling against the ‘saucy doubts and fears’ which the news of Fleance's escape have aroused. The banquet itself and Macbeth's toasts to Banquo are not the bravado of the villain, or even merely excitement of the spectators' sense of irony, so much as declarations that he can master events by imposing upon them a semblance or order with himself unchallengeably at the centre. But the ghost’s appearance breaks through this from the world of the horrid image; it is as though Macbeth's instinctive rejection of murder has created ever more elaborate forms—the shuddering bewilderment of the first soliloquy developing through the nightmare visions before and after Duncan's murder into the completely uncontrollable phantasm of the murdered Banquo. All these seem to come from some deep place in Macbeth's own personality, the part that is at war both with the Macbeth who can rationally and morally consider murder as a means to an end and the Macbeth who endeavours to master both the inner and outer worlds with the strained and exalted language of his invocatory poems. Banquo's ghost is the most desperate of these creations of his heat-oppressed brain, and Lady Macbeth recognizes its provenance and kinship:

This is the very painting of your fear:
This is the air-drawn dagger, which, you said,
Led you to Duncan.

(iii.iv.61-63)

He is convinced that it has objective reality, and it confuses his sense of his own identity and of the nature of the world in which he lives. It is the moment where the drama of Macbeth's inner life actually takes the form of two personae: the haunted man and that which haunts him, so that we feel ourselves looking at a kind of allegorical embodiment of his relationship with his deeds. Banquo is not only the ghost of a murdered man, but a figure of ‘fantastical’ Murther itself:

Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;
Thou hast no speculation in those eyes,
Which thou dost glare with.

(iii.iv.93-95)

The ‘horrid image’ of the first soliloquy, the ‘wither'd Murther’, the ‘horrid deed’, ‘the terrible feat’, and the ‘deed of dreadful note’, the ‘dark hour’ have all risen up to appal Macbeth with an actualization of what he has so often named and used and thought about. His chosen role, the crime to which he gave birth, the special act which brands him, is now complete before him.
Macbeth breaks away from this repeated pattern of character in an excess of despairing vigour. Shakespeare closes up like a fan all that complex intercourse between character and deed, each shaping the other, which has presented Macbeth's life to us. This, it seems, happens quite suddenly in the play, and it is as easy to ascribe it to an authorial intervention as it is difficult to identify its cause in what is shown to us of the motives of the character. It is true that Macbeth's isolation has increased (in his refusal to share the secret of Banquo's murder with Lady Macbeth) and that he has partially at any rate learnt what he was not at all practised at previously, to make his face a vizard to his heart. These are signs of the hardening of his nature, but he certainly fails each time he tries to act a brazen part; after Duncan's murder, Malcolm, Donalbain, and, of course, Banquo are not really deceived, and Macbeth's failure to sustain his poise after Banquo's murder is his worst and most public. The Macbeth who is so continually on the rack up to the ending of iii.iv cannot be said to have grown as cruel as his deeds, although he darkens them deliberately with the persuasive trappings of Hecate, Night, Murther—trappings which may be described as deliberate attempts to make his inward self of the same nature as the deed that's done but which so completely fail to sustain him when he really sees the deed for what it is. If the new brutality and directness of Macbeth's resolution after iii.iv do not appear arbitrary or in any way diminish the play, it is because the spectators have already had the two murders directly brought home to them in their full horror: it is mediated to them, paradoxically enough, by Macbeth's own horror, which we share, but also by the direct evidence of Duncan's graciousness, Banquo's virtues (and the witnessed annihilation of them), the storms and portents of outraged nature, and the general sense of a movement of recoil amongst the gathering forces of restoration and retribution. Acts which so cogently persuade us of their evil character lead easily to the inference that the man who can do them must quickly come to the point of no return and become a creature like his deeds. He does so; but we are not shown the antecedents of his transformation. The murderer of Banquo, who is fundamentally the same sort of person as the murderer of Duncan, becomes the murderer of Lady Macduff without our really being forced to ask what has altered the pattern of his character, why the long adjustment to the deed and the horrid imagination breaking through after it are no longer there. A practical motive for his abridgement of the whole process can be sought for—the need to check the gathering revolt at once; or we can say that it is born out of sheer despair, a wild lashing-out at Fate. But these are inferences, too, and only refer us back to the larger inference, that the nature of the criminal must be hardened and narrowed into despair by unrepented crime. Macbeth suddenly discovers this hard nature and drives on with it. But he could—the potentiality is there up to iii.iv in his remorse, his heavy disliking of his task, the continual rebirth of the horrid image—just as easily, had Shakespeare's story permitted it, have turned to repentance—more easily, since it is the remorse and horror in his character that continually makes the toughness which he assumes give way before it. It is the fact that he has murdered rather than the way in which he has murdered which shuts off any escape route from him. This may be a very sound assumption about the nature of things, as it is certainly a true rendering of the rule that appears to apply in Macbeth's Scotland and Macbeth's cosmos, and it is plainly a good sort of deterrent against those intending murder from whatever motive. But it does not exactly offer the terms for explaining, in the light of what we already know about Macbeth's character, how he can suddenly alter that character and devise a new, more brutal—one could almost say 'uncharacteristic'—approach to murder.

In future, then, Macbeth will ‘think’ no more:

Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,
Which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd.

(iii.iv.138-9)

The gap between ‘head’ and ‘hand’ is to be ferociously narrowed; *scanned* has the double sense of examined ‘by myself’ as well as discovered ‘by others’. Macbeth goes to the Witches in order to ‘know, / By the worst means, the worst’, in order to direct his course the more unswervingly, and his sense of how much this is the ‘worst’ means is mediated by his willingness to bring about ultimate destruction in order to have his path clear (iv.i.50-61). Yet he faces this, out of his frantic desire for the simultaneity of his thought with his doing.
which is intensified by the news of Macduff's escape:

Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits:
The flighty purpose never is o'ertook,
Unless the deed go with it. From this moment,
The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done.

(iv.i.144-9)

This conjunction of head/hand, heart/hand, thought/act leaves no space for the old Macbeth, whose characteristic vitality, interest, and appeal derived precisely from the complex and changeable inner life of head and heart called forth by his prospects and retrospects of the work of his hand. By eliminating all that area of Macbeth's activity Shakespeare has shown us not so much a change of character (for we never actually see the process of change—the area is not gradually but sharply shut off) as the result of such a change. A different Macbeth is revealed, and the interest and pathos that it has depends heavily upon the fact of our knowing that he was not always like this. Macbeth's character is like a portion of a spectrum in which the two colours are quite sharply distinguished from one another but are none the less harmoniously related in the sense that they form an aesthetically satisfying spectacle—but perhaps a morally less satisfying one.

How much of the life of the play resides in Macbeth's imaginative actualization of his own deeds is pretty clearly demonstrated by what may be called the Macduff episode (iv.ii,iii). The destruction of Macduff's family is the most pointless and horrible of Macbeth's crimes; but since Macbeth's feelings are not engaged in it (that, indeed, is the point, and what he has come to), it lacks a dimension which the murders of Duncan and Banquo possess. Even Bradley seems to have felt it to be unnecessary, except as having 'a technical value in helping to give the last stage of the action the form of a conflict between Macbeth and Macduff', but defended it on the grounds that it, and the scene of Macduff's grief, permits us to escape from 'the oppression of huge sins and sufferings into the presence of the wholesome affections of unambitious hearts'. If this is so, the scenes, including the episode between Malcolm and Macduff, represent the order and values which Macbeth has violated, and which are now gathering head against him. Thus the primary element in the scenes, even though Macbeth is in the plot their cause, is something which flows against rather than from Macbeth, and has little relevance to the definition of his character in the sense in which it has been discussed in this chapter.

Macbeth's actions in the last phase of the play are shallow and short-breathed. They are harshly limited in being mostly reactions against the threats from outside ('They have tied me to a stake'), and at the other end are ridden on the short, rotten rein of the Witches' prophecies. Both the defiance and the confidence fail to rise out of the personality from any depths in the man; they are animal-like; reflex actions to situations and stimuli whose originating agents lie outside Macbeth's control. That he can discover nothing in himself which will respond at any deeper level is shown by the passive, exhausted way in which he takes the news of Lady Macbeth's death. For to set against the confidence (which is sometimes near to hysteria) we have Macbeth's exhausted commentary on the failure of his whole enterprise and the meaningless play-acting of life. Like Richard III he sees life as a succession of parts to which no real self is dedicated, which do not communicate with anything in the mimic, for the mimic is a shadow without substance, ridiculously shortened by time. This other mood of Macbeth has no relation in the man himself—only that which the audience may infer—with the defiant Macbeth; the two states do not interpenetrate. Their separation shows what has happened to the complete man, the man whose pattern of experience gave at least evidence that the conflicting elements in him arose from a personality that was still a full circle, not two broken halves. Macbeth's last state is no worse—and no better—than this. It is the common experience: the need to keep on, the sense of the failure and pointlessness of it all. Macbeth cannot integrate the two even enough to bring him to the point of suicide (there perhaps Lady Macbeth has the advantage of him). Is this 'Hell', as some think? Surely not, if we expect
Hell to be something more out of the common, more preternaturally defined. Macbeth's huge crimes, which rouse all Nature against him, are in ironic contrast to the ordinariness of his final state; that woods should march and prophecies be ironically confirmed seems an immense labour for the destruction of so unterrifying a thing. That master shape, that colossus brooding over a nightmare world—Macbeth even in his most determined imaginations never achieved so large a stature; he ends by merely hitting out, a child tragically armed with weapons that can destroy a country. The monster of evil that Macduff and Malcolm need to see, and that some of the commentators require also, is in the end simply not there; Macbeth never quite succeeded in imagining him.

Notes

4. Ibid., p. 392.

Criticism: Character Studies: Lisa Low (essay date 1983)


[In the following essay, Low contends that Macbeth is sympathetic to audiences in his remorsefulness, and that he guides the drama toward a possible path of redemption.]

But where there is danger,
There grows also what saves.

Hölderlin

Unlike most tragic heroes, Macbeth is much less sinned against than sinning, which makes him a strange candidate for our affections.¹ He does not fall prey to infirmity like Lear, nor is he ignorant of what he does like Oedipus. He is not like Romeo, well-intentioned but too hasty; nor is he like Hamlet, Romeo's inverse, too cool. Too hot to stop, too cool to feel, Macbeth is no Romeo and no Hamlet. He is a fiend and a butcher. Standing before him, we cannot but be paralyzed with fear.

And yet, almost against our wills, we are drawn to Macbeth. We should not be, but we are. We are with him in his darkest hours and though we cannot especially hope for his success, we share with him the uncomfortable feeling that what must be done must be done and that what has been done cannot be undone. Banquo, who we come to feel is a threat to ourselves, however good, must be eliminated. So must Fleance, Macduff's wife and children, or anyone else who stands in the highway of our intense progress. Thinking that “to be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus,” and wishing with “barefaced power” to sweep him from our sights, we straddle the play repelled by, but irresistibly drawn to Macbeth.

We listen to Macbeth as we listen to the beatings of our hearts. Engaged in the play, we think our hands are up to the wrists in blood and we startle at the knockings at our doors. Watching Macbeth, we suspect the height and depth of our own evil, testing ourselves up to the waist in the waters of some bloody lake. Allowed to do that which we must not do, guaranteed that we shall suffer for it, we watch Macbeth by laying our ears up against the door where our own silent nightmares are proceeding. There we see ourselves projected, gone somehow suddenly wrong, participating in the unforgivable, pursued by the unforgiving, which is, most of all, ourselves.
Why should this be? Why are we so drawn to Macbeth by whom we must be at last repelled? Two reasons suggest themselves. First, we identify with Macbeth because identification is the condition of the theatre, especially in a nearly expressionistic play like Macbeth where the stage is the meeting ground between the hero's psyche and ours. Second, we pity Macbeth because, like us, he moves within breathing distance of innocence.

As moral obscurity is the world in which Macbeth stands at the beginning of his play, so it is the world in which we are seated watching the play, for the stage is both an extension of Macbeth's mind and the field of our imaginations. There in the domed, dimly lit theatre we watch like swaddled infants, this two hour's traffic, this our own strutting and fretting upon a bloody stage. Before us the Macbeths move like shadowy players, brief candles, little vaporous forms sliding behind a scrim. As if standing in Plato's cave, we see, but at one remove, we listen, but only to echoes, until we find ourselves fumbling along the corridors of our own dark psyches. There, supping on evil, dipped to the waist in blood, we watch the Macbeths go out at last in a clatter of sound, pursued by furies. The play over and the brief candles out, night flees, vapors vanish, and light is restored.

We identify with Macbeth because the theatre makes us suffer the illusion that we are Macbeth. We pity him because, like us, he stands next to innocence in a world in which evil is a prerequisite for being human. Macbeth is not motivelessly malicious like Richard III or Iago. He savors no sadistic pleasure in cruelty. Rather, set within reach of glory, he reaches and falls, and falling he is sick with remorse.

To have a clear conscience is to stand in the sun. To have a clouded conscience, one hovering between good and evil, between desire and restraint, is to stand where most of us stand, in that strange and obscure purgatory where the wind is pocketed with hot and cool trends, where the air is not nimble and sweet but fair and foul. This is the world of choice where thought and act and hand and eye are knit, but in a system of checks and balances.

Set within reach of triumph, who is not tempted to reach? And who, plucking one, will not compulsively and helplessly pluck every apple from the apple tree? For the line dividing self-preservation from ambition is often thin and we walk as if on a narrow cord above an abyss. We have constantly to choose, almost against our wills, for good, for as it is easier to fall than fly, so it is easier to be like Satan than God. We identify with Macbeth because we live in a dangerous world where a slip is likely to be a fall; but in the end, we must rip ourselves from him violently, as of a curse, as of an intolerable knowledge of ourselves. Through him we pay our chief debts to the unthinkable and are washed, when we wake, up onto the white shores of our own innocence. Macbeth is an ironic Christ who absorbs our sins that we may return “striding the blast.” Redeemed through him, we ourselves must become the redeemers.

II

I have said that our sympathy for Macbeth is provoked by at least two factors: 1) the obscurely lit stage which is the meeting ground of Macbeth's imagination and ours; and 2) the condition of evil above which most of us manage to stand, but only by hard choice. I would like in the second portion of this essay to say something more about Macbeth's function as a restorer of the redemptive imagination and to describe the condition of terror into which, for our sakes, Macbeth falls.

Macbeth's damnation comes of a willed failure of the imagination. He permits himself, in spite of conscience, to kill his King. His eyes “wink” at his hands and in that dark moment all cruelties become possible:

Stars, let not light see my black and deep desires.
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.
Conversely, our redemptive victory over Macbeth and over ourselves results from the strengthening of the empathetic imagination which our participation in Macbeth's fall affords. The play restores in us pity which

... like a naked new-born babe
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye
That tears shall drown the wind.

In short, we live and die by our imagination's willingness to comprehend and we comprehend with our eyes. The play is an acting out before our mind's eyes of ourselves participating in and then eschewing evil.

In Babi Yar, Andrei Kuznetsov writes that he did not hate the Nazis, it was only that they lacked imagination. Not feeling the sympathy which retards cruelty or the empathy which prevents it, the German soldiers at Babi Yar severed hand from eye and act from conscience in order to carry out daily rounds of slaughter. Day after day, Russian Jews were lined up along precipices and shot. Murder required only blankness of mind.

If sympathy retards cruelty, empathy prevents it. To be in someone else's skin is to startle at pain, to recoil with human pity from unkindness. Foolish enough to think it possible to commit black deeds and not to be held "to accompt" for it, Macbeth permits his imagination to fail. Considering himself outside his own human skin, Macbeth severs himself. He calls for darkness, commits evil, and is walled-in afterwards in the windowless dungeon of his imagination. A cord yanked from its socket, a chicken with its head cut off, Macbeth shrieks and jerks his way down the corridors of his maimed psyche into death's private cell.

Since cruelty depends upon the imagination's willingness not to see, it is best carried out in darkness. Night obscures witness, prevents the compassionate eye, the organ of pity, the cherub at the gate of sense, from mutinying against the hand. So Macbeth calls for night to cloak Duncan's murder with "Stars, hide your fires," and so he prepares for Banquo's death with "Come, seeling night." The world of the play is so black that light is a contradiction:

Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man's act,
Threatens his bloody stage. By th' clock 'tis day,
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp.

The sun is no more than a "travelling lamp" for Macbeth's birth-strangled mind, travelling in self-willed darkness, troubles even the heavens. After flickering tapers, brief candles, and stars in heaven blown out, the "tomorrow" speech "memorize[s] another Golgotha," finally confirming the bloody stage as a sunless habitation where by the light of lamps, by the light of his own dimming intelligence, Macbeth's crimes have occurred. Macbeth has stood titanic in the way of his own sun and ours.

Darkness has its consequences. Once commit yourself to darkness and you are no longer eligible for light's sanctuary. Macbeth calls on darkness to prevent witness to his crime; he wills his eyes to "wink" at his hands, but when he does so, he slits his own wrists and throat. He blacks out.

Shakespeare explores this slitting, this recession into darkness, with physiological metaphors. The cords Macbeth severs—the umbilical one that runs from himself to his kingdom—and the veins and arteries that connect his brain and soul to his body—are the ones which allow him to thrive. Having cut these Macbeth travels through the play as death-in-life—blind, suffocating, stiffening in rigor mortis—toward his actual decapitation. Cut off, running beheaded, Macbeth loses internal and external equilibrium. Circulation and communication stop; his body survives, but only briefly, as a body will survive on the impulse of shock, when it has been severed from its head.
Shock has two countermotions: wildness and paralysis. Macbeth's wild power decreases inversely as he seeks to increase it; the larger the sweep of his hand, the more cribbed and cabinned his soul; the greater the space about his feet, as a throned king, the less room his mind has to run about in. Macbeth's reason is pushed from its stool and his body is repelled by the mind that commands it. His mind, in a “restless ecstasy,” tries to hold onto the wooden mask it no longer fits and his body scrambles within clothes it cannot shape. Mind and form stand at odds as a crown tilts lopsidedly on a brow for which it was not meant. Time is pushed from its center and runs elliptically. Eye and hand, moving and fixed are jarred and confused by fits and starts until, “as two spent swimmers that do cling together / And choke their art,” spirit is wrenched from body and stutters from sublimity to silence.

Decapitation’s “restless ecstasy” is succeeded by its counter motion rigor mortis, the gradual turning to stone. Because the dark plain Macbeth's mind rides is full of “strange images of death,” of “new Gorgon[s]” to destroy sight, Macbeth becomes himself a Gorgon. At the idea of murdering Duncan Macbeth's heart leaps, knocking at his ribs, and his hair stands on end:

Why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature?

This Medusa-like image of “unfixed hair” is repeated. Imagining Banquo has risen again with “twenty mortal murders on [his] crown [,]” Macbeth gasps at the image he sees: “Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake / Thy gory locks at me.” Banquo's hacked hair stands up in the same snaky Medusa locks that Macbeth's hair had at the prospect of killing Duncan. We see the same head in the murdered Duncan. Announcing the King's death to the castle walls Macduff cries: “Approach the chamber and destroy your sight / With a new Gorgon.”

Were the person next to you in the theatre to knock your sleeve at this point and ask you the time, your eyes would be transfixed, comprehending nothing, as if you had been in another man's dream. Watching the play you are as the dead, for the eyes of the dead have no speculation, perhaps because they dream another dream. So Macbeth shrinks at his vision of Banquo:

Avaunt, and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee!
Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;
Thou hast no speculation in those eyes
Which thou dost glare with!

More than any other feature the eyes connect us to this world. They are the windows to the soul and the soul's windows to the world. Speak to someone's eyes and you will know who you speak to. Macbeth's eyes are as if rolled up into his skull for, dreaming a vision no one in his kingdom can dream, he is far away. Intoxicated, mad, trapped, Macbeth gazes permanently into the bloody narcissus pool of his own mind.

So does Lady Macbeth. She who chided her husband by saying

Are but as pictures. 'Tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil.

becomes herself a painted devil. Sleepwalking, haunted by her crimes, her “eyes are open … but their sense are shut.” Like Macbeth's, her mind has closed down around itself, admitting no light, and she sees only the blood upon her hands which, for all her rubbing, for all her “out, damned spot[s],” will not rub away. A “little water” cannot clear her of her deeds, nor can she wash the “filthy witness” from her eyes. Instead, the very water with which she tries to rinse her hands free will turn red, proclaiming she is a murderer.
The Macbeths run fast but not far. Macbeth's, unlike Lear's, is an eye for an eye world where to kill a king is to commend “th-ingredience” of the “poisoned chalice” back to the lips of the murderer. Thus, Macbeth's own body revolts against him as he considers the image of a dead Duncan. He wills his eyes to “wink” at his hands; later he wills his hands to “pluck out” his eyes. The smiling babe that Lady Macbeth promises to yank from her milkless breast returns striding the apocalyptic blast. The dead are nature's enfants terribles, rising again to push Macbeth from his stool:

That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end. But now they rise again,
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,
And push us from our stools.

The dead Banquo's face is mirrored in a prodigious series of child kings to come, and the trees at Birnam Wood, cut off at the root, walk toward Dunsinane to defeat Macbeth. The witches' riddles invert as Macduff strides not “of woman born” to behead the beheader. As the dead infant shrivels to a counterfeit, the screaming infant, hanging on its bloody root, the umbilical cord, becomes the world restorer.

III

I have said in Part One that we are drawn to Macbeth, almost against our wills, both because the theatre makes us dream we are Macbeth, and because, a villain against his will, he walks near innocence, anguished by remorse. In Part Two I have said that Macbeth is our ironic Christ who, absorbing our sins, allows us to be redeemed. In Part Two I have also described the conditions of darkness into which the damned Macbeth falls. I have described what it is like to commit terrible sins against the race and have hinted at the restorative powers of the redeeming imagination in a world where “blood will have blood.” It should be clear by now that Macbeth is a play which moves neither in the land of evil nor in the present, but rather in the land of good and in the future. In these last two brief sections I would like to describe the damned and the redeemed imagination, for we come to Macbeth and are entangled, but we leave Macbeth released, having learned not what we are, but what we must become.

The imagination is not bound by formal laws of nature. It can pass through walls, enter heaven, drive down into hell. It can make a villain of a hero, and a hero of a villain. When Macbeth stands at the beginning of his play in the fair and foul air of his private thoughts, he is standing between two such large ideas as heaven and hell. As it is heavenly to have new honors sitting upon the brow, so it is hell to stuff the mouth of praise with a dagger. It is hell, too, to be tied to the stake of one ambitious thought until flesh is hacked from bone.

Macbeth stands in the murky, chiaroscuro world of conscience and conscientiousness, between good and evil, a step toward heaven and a slip toward hell. There is but a thinly scratched line between right and wrong, between a sword smoking in a villain's blood and a villain smoking in the blood of a king. Here to “unseam” a man “from the nave to th' chops” may be either a moment of barbaric inhumanity or patriotic fervor. Here if death to the left is laudable, to the right it is enough to throw the self off balance, to push it from its stool and into the blackest abyss of hell. If Hamlet leans upon a question mark, Macbeth rides into an “if.” For this we empathize when we watch Macbeth “upon this bank and shoal of time … jump the life to come.” For this we feel pity as Macbeth does not “trammel up” but rather unravels “the sleave of care.”

Thoughts pass in the mind like crows to rooky woods. To catch at a thought, to snag it, to blow it up and become oppressed by it, is to subordinate the reason, the healthy remainder of the mind, to a static picture. It is to eat of “the insane root / That takes the reason prisoner.” Life stops. Instead of extirpating the “insane root” obsession, Macbeth cultivates it. Thereafter all else is choked out and the kingdom of his mind becomes not as it should be, a mass of impressions taken in from without, mingled with history and memory, but instead one single knotted mass. The mind's fundamental will, its overriding flexible complexity, cannot be so
tethered and survive. The mind as a breathing organism in equilibrium with the world and with the social order stops. Or, infected with itself, it invents its own world.

*Macbeth* approaches the expressionism to which Shakespeare did not have access. Pressing up against the boundaries of its medium, the play explodes with the pressure of Macbeth's mind. Its language is clotted and heat-oppressed. As Macbeth's mind is “full of scorpions” so is the play's. As Buchner's *Woyceck*, Munch's *The Scream*, and Van Gogh's self-portraits present minds on the verge of madness, so does *Macbeth*. Shut off from the country of health Macbeth's brain, like a poison bag, distends and bursts, infecting its world. When Ross says,

But cruel are the times when we are traitors
And do not know ourselves; when we hold rumor
From what we fear, yet know not what we fear
But float upon a wild and violent sea
Each way and none

we recognize that the play occurs inside the upset equilibrium of Macbeth's panicking mind.

The mind is the deepest recess within the castle walls of the face; it is private, isolated, and vulnerable. We feel this play as we test electricity with one finger in water, or as if electric wires were tapping against the skull. Because we never feel, even for a moment, Macbeth's safety; because we hear him breathe in our ears his bloody imaginings, we watch the play, as we look at a late Van Gogh, as if we were studying a mind from inside out. In this *Macbeth* most moves and terrifies us. Watching the play, we voyage on “a wild and violent sea” of a mind made mad by its own cruelty. The terror of this passage:

What hands are here? Ha! they pluck out mine eyes.
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine
Making the green one red

is immense because, for him, all is unredeemable. Macbeth, having shut his eyes to pity, having “rapt” himself in turbanned darkness, is condemned to a plain darkened by the red seas of his own guilt. The water with which he tries to rinse his hands clean will condemn him. Macbeth is a painted devil before a mirror and the play, until he is decapitated, is his self-portrait and ours.

**IV**

We come to the play and our imaginations are tethered to Macbeth as to our own guilt. We leave the play, after having ripped ourselves free of him, with imaginations redeemed. The play teaches us how to become what we can become, for we live, like Macduff, not ultimately within Macbeth's imagination, but within the greater imagination of God—within the greater will to goodness in ourselves. When the play is done, when vapors vanish and light is restored, Macbeth lies, titanically defeated, within the vast circumference of the audience's redeemed and redeeming imagination.

In this last section I would like to say something about the providential vision toward which Shakespeare is moving. The nature of his vision in this pivotal play is oddly Miltonic. That is, good wins because good is the life force, the *elan vital*. Evil, to the contrary, can only mimic good, feed off of its motifs parasitically. In the end, ripped free of good, evil withers at the root. The function of drama, of *Macbeth*, is to have evil painted upon a pole underscored as “the tyrant.” Through witnessing evil we are exorcised of it, becoming good. Ultimately we rise free not only of Macbeth, but of death, as if by our willing it, death itself could die.
If Macbeth's mind is earthly, a globe where fair and foul, welcome and unwelcome vapors are mixed, it is also limited. Macbeth's imagination stands within the greater imagination of miracle, the providential vision toward which, as O. B. Hardison and Emrys Jones have recently demonstrated, Shakespeare is moving. The play is acted out within the compressed and dark quarters of an earthly hell, but it moves finally toward the city of infinite good. Macbeth's Satanic mind, eyes, hands, and touch are contained within the supranatural forces of Macduff who was from his “mother's womb untimely ripped”; of Duncan, whose unearthly blood is like gold laced upon silver skin; and of Edward the Confessor, whose touch has “such sanctity” from heaven that he can heal victims of the bubonic plague. If there is a special poignance to Malcolm's dramatically ironic comment to Macduff, “He hath not touched you yet,” there is an ending to it and to the jurisdiction of the tyrant's grasp. For this play stands not in Macbeth's hand but in “the great hand of God.”

In Macbeth evil feeds off of good. Sin and death, here as in Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained, are not self-invented, but parasitic. Duncan enfolds, embraces, enriches and plants; he is the Christ-like incarnation of the Biblical blessing on human sexuality, “Be fruitful and multiply.” The Macbeths, conversely, are sterile. They can neither be fruitful, nor multiply; instead they can only shrink, melt down, as the witch does in The Wizard of Oz and as Satan does in Paradise Lost. Macbeth shrinks within his armor. By his end he is a clanging bell of doom, a great clatter upon the stairs, a suit of armor that has become an echo chamber because it is hollow. Thus Macduff knows Macbeth by his sound, “That way the noise is. Tyrant, show thy face!” and “There thou shouldst be: / By this great clatter one of greatest note / Seems bruited.”

As the “juggling fiends … palter” with Macbeth in a “double sense” so does time. Foul meets fair and evil good. Eyes without speculation, rolled up, shut as if eternally inside, roll down at the sound of the apocalypse:

Ring the alarum bell! Murder and treason!
Shake off this downy sleep, death's counterpart,
And look on death itself. Up, up, and see
The great doom's image. Malcolm! Banquo!
As from your graves rise up and walk like sprites
To countenance this horror. Ring the bell!

The dead are avenged, raised from graves to bear witness to the eternal damnation of the damned. The good wake to see the bloody Macbeth, the birth-strangled babe, death itself.

When Macduff reveals himself to Macbeth as the man who not “of woman born” was from his “mother's womb untimely ripped” Macbeth knows what we already know, that though he will fight until his flesh is hacked from his bones, he will be defeated. As Macduff raises his sword he proclaims Macbeth's role for us as redeemer,

And live to be the show and gaze o’ the’ time.
We’ll have thee, as our rarer monsters are,
Painted upon a pole, and underwrit
‘Here may you see the tyrant.’

That Macbeth will be the “show … o' th' time” puns on the complex emotional effects which drama and visual art have upon us. Beheaded, gored, terrified, and terrifying, Macbeth shall “live” before an audience who shall know through him the true fruit of sin.

In a world of good where “stones … move and trees … speak” evil depends, for its lifeblood, upon good. The bloody babe from the womb, this play's Christ-like deus ex machina, makes of the birth-strangled babe a counterfeit. Because evil has of itself no godliness, because it cannot reproduce but only copy, borrowing for its temporary life blood and babes and roots, it can only be the inverse of live. Uprooted, severed, dependent,
the bad is marrowless. If this is true, around random weeds the world will root itself, restore itself infinitely in
an ecstasy of green, out of a bath of blood. Around the mask of evil the audience humankind will press,
celebrating the exorcism of the devil from the self.

Because in the end “where there is danger, / There grows also what saves,” we rid ourselves of our
Macbethness by necessity. Having merged ourselves with Macbeth in the private obscurity of the dimly lit
stage, having said not, “This castle hath a pleasant seat,” but, “The raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the
fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements,” we have learned empathy; we have learned to bear the pain
of others as if it were our own. In the end we rise naked and trumpeting above the gray trembling earth,
shaking off “this downy sleep, death's counterfeit.” Lifted up bodily toward Malcolm and Macduff, we are
within reach of Duncan. With trumpets to our lips and wings to support us, we stand like bloody generals for
good and for God. Darkness and devils having been torn from us at last, the earth vanishes and we stand in
eternity's light. For cruelty in us is a painted thing, life's counterfeit, a blight to be shaken off at the end of
unredeemed time. These are the good “bloody instructions” of plays and players. Through Macbeth we learn
what monsters are, what a monstrous thing it is to kill a king, God's infant man. When the play is done we
shake off the “strange images of death” we have become to be the selves of our hereafter, seeing evil, even
death, as Macbeth is: dominionless—a gored mask, a painted devil, a head of unfixed hair upon a post.

Note

1. All quotations from Macbeth are taken from Alfred Harbage's William Shakespeare: The Complete
Works (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1970). I would like to thank Normand Berlin for his enthusiastic
support of this essay.

Criticism: Production Reviews: Kenneth S. Rothwell (review date 2000)


[In the following excerpted review of Trevor Nunn's 1979 production of Macbeth recorded on video, Rothwell
praises the haunting performances of Ian McKellen as Macbeth and Judi Dench as Lady Macbeth, as well as
Nunn's skilled direction.]

The critically acclaimed Trevor Nunn Macbeth (1979), re-recorded on VHS for HBO, returns theater to
primal ritual. Macbeth is Shakespeare's journey into the heart of darkness, which probes into the nether
regions of the unconscious where shameful desires lie hidden like the damned frozen in ice at the center of
Dante's Inferno. Macbeth (Ian McKellen) and his Lady (Judi Dench) wring the last drop of misery out of the
nightmare human condition in which there is no hope but only remorse and eventual extinction (“Out, out
brief candle! / Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player …”).

Nunn shatters all dogma about the inadequacies of television by brilliantly transforming the original 1976
stage production at Stratford's experimental The Other Place theater into scintillating video drama. This is no
simple-minded aiming of cameras at a cluster of talking heads but a creative and shrewd orchestration of
camera and action. From an opening overhead shot of the actors arranged in a small Druidic circle, the camera
then plays endless variations on the interplay between and among the actors and even the audience. Staging
and costume are minimalist to the extreme, Judi Dench as Lady Macbeth, for example, being garbed in a
tent-like garment with a black skull cap cloth on her head. When a still confident Lady Macbeth snatches the
daggers away from her quailing husband (“Infirm of purpose! / Give me the daggers.”), no barrier intervenes
between the Macbeths' anguish and the audience's own anxieties. The intruding and intrusive camera often
moves in tight and almost embeds itself in the principal's bodies, as when a writhing Ian McKellen and Judi
Dench make a fetish out of virtually melting into each others' flesh.

At the disastrous dinner party, when Banquo's ghost impudently appears, the rhythm of the editing acts as a metronome timing the emotional escalation of host and hostess as Lady Macbeth suffers unspeakable humiliation from her husband's weird behavior. Ian McDiarmid as the Porter with the thickest of country dialects turns in a spectacular performance when he appears in braces over a bare chest to answer the knocking at the gate, and then doubles as Ross. Not to be overlooked, either, is the straightforward way that Nunn identifies Seyton (Greg Hicks), Macbeth's loyal retainer, as the mysterious Third Murderer. This is not just Shakespeare at his best but video at its best. Not to be missed.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Arthur Lindley (essay date 2001)**


[In the following essay, Lindley considers Orson Welles's film version of *Macbeth* as a powerful influence on later filmic representations of the European Middle Ages.]

I want to consider Welles's *Macbeth* in a different frame from the usual ones, viewing it less as a Shakespearean or Wellesian film than as a medieval one. From its opening words, the film stakes a claim to historicity—claiming to depict the period of Christianity's first penetration of a barbarian world—that is belied by virtually everything that follows: the visual invocations of westerns and film noir, the anachronistic grotesqueries of costuming, the fabular simplification of character to the demands of a parable about the resistible rise of gothic tyranny, what Michael Anderegg (84) has called the “post-nuclear” devastation of its landscape. In creating this notional and abstract version of the Middle Ages as a theatre in which to play out an estranged version of the political concerns of the late 1940s, Welles works against Shakespeare to suppress the Renaissance context of the original play, substituting in particular a myth of the eternal return of tyranny—“Peace, the charm's wound up”—for the linear and progressive development of Scotland and England invoked in Shakespeare's text. In Welles's version, as in Polanski's later and better one, Macbeth doesn't lead to King James; he leads to another Macbeth.

In so doing, Welles both conforms to and helps to shape the conventions that have controlled the depiction of the Middle Ages for at least the last fifty years of film history. Arguably, this film has had a greater impact, for better or (mostly) for worse, on medieval films than on Shakespeare or Shakespearean film. Part of that impact has been to reinforce the prevailing confusion of “dark ages” with Middle Ages; this *Macbeth* is, after all, an extreme example of that equation of the medieval with mud, murk, monks, and bloodshed common to people who know little about the period and care less. Welles's own attitude toward the period is concisely expressed in the version of the coming of the Renaissance given in his Introduction to *The Mercury Shakespeare*:

> Down in Italy … men had taken the hoods of the dusty, dusky old Middle Ages off their heads and begun to look around. … Books were being written instead of copied; people had stopped taking Aristotle's word for it and were nosing around the world, taking it apart to see what made it run.

(Qtd. in Kodar 210)

Cruel as it is to cite a man's popularizations against him, this constitutes fair warning. If you start from this view of the Middle Ages, you are unlikely to use them as anything except a pretext for talking about
something else. In that, unfortunately, Welles is the precursor of an entire genre of medieval films. I want to put his *Macbeth* in the context of that genre.

For five years at the National University of Singapore I taught an honors-year seminar in Film and History, originally designed to compare and contrast the ways in which films of the Middle Ages and those dealing with recent history reconstruct the past. I quickly figured out that almost all the “history” was in the latter, modern half of the course. Soon after, I realized that virtually none of my medieval films—Welles's included—was reconstructing the past at all, at least not in the detailed, furniture-fixated way of, say, Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* (1993). Also unlike Scorsese but more importantly, the medieval films did not work from the assumption that the past was of inherent interest or historically connected to the present. While the recent past is customarily presented as causatively connected to the present, the medieval past is virtually always presented as an analogue—usually for our basest behavior—a distant, alienating mirror, as Welles's Scotland is an estranged version of Germany or that more abstract place, Fascism-land.

To see what I mean, let's look at one of the most familiar opening sequences in nominally historical film: the one from Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (Sweden 1957), a work which shares to a remarkable extent the stylistic vocabulary of *Macbeth*. Let me remind you of the elements of that famous sequence: the hawk hanging in the stormy sky accompanied by a notably shrill version of the *Kyrie Eleison*; a rocky shore under dark cliffs between an empty sea and an empty sky; two isolated figures, one with a dagger at hand, waking on the rocks; a Wellesian, voice-over reading of Revelations 8; the chess set with the sea behind it; Block's failed attempt to pray; the appearance of the monastically robed Death; the two figures sitting down to play.

Is this the Middle Ages? While notionally in 1349, we are actually in Beckett-time (that is, Any- or No-time), the major difference being that in this case Godot has come and turned out to be just what we thought he would be, though disguised as Mephistopheles. The place, nominally if namelessly Swedish, is a beach midway between T. S. Eliot's and Neville Shute's. The actors we meet later are on their way to Elsinore, presumably to entertain Fortinbras. We are looking, in short, at the painfully familiar Never-never-but-Always land of mid-twentieth century European high modernism, the same territory inhabited by Jeanette Nolan's furred and Freudianized Lady Macbeth. If we are in any historical period, it is less the 1340s of the plot premise than the sub-atomic early 1950s, with universal death looming out of the northern sky. As Peter Cowie has written, the film “reflect[s] the trepidation of the Cold War era.” A child of the fifties myself, I react to that hawk by wanting to crawl under my school desk.

The music is medieval—if you assume that the *Kyrie* is automatically “medieval”—but filtered through modernist, electronic distortion. Even Block's chess set has clearly been borrowed from another, more highly polished age. And, of course, Antonius and Jons have landed on this beach conspicuously without ship or other means of transport, called, like Death himself, by the needs of allegory, and landed in a notional 1340s derived more from mystery plays and woodcuts—and an earlier Bergman play—than from any but the flimsiest of historical records. Even the meals they later eat will be symbolic: from beatific (and intertextual) strawberries and milk to bitter bread. Not to labor an obvious point too long, we are looking—as we are in Welles's *Macbeth*—at a version of the Middle Ages that has been carefully lifted out of historical sequence in order to serve as an alienating device for viewing the mid-century present and/or the timeless present of parable. This is not a fault, merely a fact. What is perhaps more striking is how many films, even those ostensibly committed to reproducing the medieval past—Vincent Ward's *The Navigator* (New Zealand 1988), even Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995)—put it to similarly ahistoric purposes. In so doing, they reflect a way of seeing enshrined in *Macbeth* and perfected in *The Seventh Seal*. I once thought the ahistoricism of Bergman's film an exception; in fact, it's the rule. *The Age of Innocence* manages to be both a meticulous (re)construction of its recent period and a meditation on the evolution of modern sexual mores and visual codes. There is no inherent reason why medieval films could not do likewise—those, at least, with the money Welles lacked to afford meticulous reconstruction—but, in my experience, they don't.
Not, of course, that one can imagine Welles wanting to do that sort of film. Virtually every significant stylistic element in Macbeth serves the common purpose of de-historicizing its world; the elaborately and insistently expressionist setting (a castle of dripping, subterranean rock whose layout persistently refuses to make literal sense); the self-reflexivity which regularly calls our attention to the soundstage and the diorama against which Banquo's murderers are posed; the use of simultaneous and/or abstract staging which allows Macbeth, for example, to change scenes by crossing directly from one part of the set to another, and which constantly invokes the stage versions from which the film evolved; the anachronistic and cross-cultural voodoo doll picked up in Welles's passage through Harlem; the extensive cross-referencing to other genres about other times—galloping horseback riders out of Republic westerns or Jeanette Nolan's embarrassing attempts at film noir seductiveness; the erasure of historical references, especially the sequence of kings from Macbeth's last encounter with the Witches; the parabola simplification of Macbeth to a transhistorical type, even as immersion in his point of view encourages us to view the film as psychodrama, concerned with the psychology of evil, not its history.

The cumulative effect of all these devices has registered on even the film's most sympathetic critics, such as Jean Cocteau:

Clad in animal skins like motorists at the turn of the century, horns and cardboard crowns on their heads, his actors haunt the corridors of some dreamlike subway, an abandoned coal mine, and ruined cellars oozing with water. … Sometimes we wonder in what period this nightmare is unfolding.

(Bazin 29)

André Bazin located it in “a prehistoric universe,” even while noting that it could be seen as a transposition of the drama of Citizen Kane (101). More recently, Michael Anderegg has suggested both that “insofar as it resembles anything other than a studio set, the world [of the film] suggests postnuclear devastation,” and that “Welles's Scotland is not so much prehistoric as outside history; his specific time and place exists as a blur; indeed we are beyond history” (84). Scotland, in my formulation, is rescued from mere history—a presumptively dead past—and lifted onto the plane of eternal, or at least contemporary, relevance: the allegorical landscape of Godot and The Seventh Seal.

If that is so, why—aside from a fidelity to the text nowhere else shown in this film—should Welles bother to place Macbeth in the Middle Ages at all? Basically, because that is where old archetypes go to die and be reborn. Once they have done so, you can—untrammeled by the demands for plausibility, surface realism, and characterization made by more recent, better known periods—stage the sort of conflicts Welles was always drawn to: superstition vs. religion, barbarism vs. civilization (at least civilization in a barbaric, i.e., medieval form), id vs. superego, Witches vs. Holy Father. (The merely individual Macbeth, remember, is equivalent to that voodoo doll: a grubby little object in the hands of the capitalized Forces of the universe.) This is, of course, the strategy of a film like John Boorman's Excalibur, where Malory is restaged as a Jungian psychodrama whose archetypal figures play out rites of passage in a once and future world. It is the strategy of Ladyhawke, with its courtship of boy/wolf and girl/falcon. The prevalence of this mode may explain why archetypes of essential sexual identity persist in medieval film when correctness has expunged them from virtually every other mode. It certainly explains why films about Robin Hood outnumber even those about St. Joan, virtually the only historical figure from the Middle Ages to have a body of films devoted to her, by so vast a margin.

I am, of course, aware that Shakespeare's Macbeth is not (quite) an historical figure, though he is one located in the linear sequence Shakespeare took from Holinshed. One problem with the film is that Welles wants to historicize that legendary figure—by placing him at the notional point of victory by the Christian force he has invented the Holy Father to embody—and to de-historicize him at the same time. That Bergman faces no such
conflict of impulses may suggest that the rules of the medieval film game were more set by 1957 than they were for Welles ten years earlier.

I am also well aware that the “reconstructions” of the past are inherently constructions, shaped, as Hayden White has taught us all, by the genres of literature. And, while the value of film creations of the past is far better understood than it was, say, ten years ago when Robert Rosenstone had to struggle to get the American Historical Review to accept a panel of essays on historical film, it is less well understood that there are fundamentally different ways of creating these pasts. Those ways, it seems to me, are differentiated chiefly by whether we are trying to imagine only ourselves and our concerns or our ancestors—a.k.a. other people—and theirs. In both cases, the bottom line of interest may be present relevance—historical film is always about the present—but in one case you imagine something different—Newland Archer and his society, say—becoming like you; in the other, you admire (or cringe from) your own image in a distant mirror. There is, I suspect, an ethical difference (as well as a psychological one) between the two modes.

In a sense, we are dealing with a simple difference between two discursive constructs of history, one linear and the other non-linear. However, that the type of construct exemplified in Welles’s Macbeth incorporates a denial of historical process and connection, and that that is the one usually applied to the filming of the Middle Ages. The dominant mode of medieval film—regardless of country of origin or degree of commercial calculation—is fabular, whatever claims, usually unfounded, a given film (Macbeth or its more sophisticated descendent Braveheart) may make to factuality. And, in practice, we automatically privilege the current signified over the medieval signifier, referring the boat people who are attacked and driven off by the villagers in The Navigator, for example, to their 1980s equivalents. The historical accuracy of that scene is clearly not the point. When we ask casually what the film of The Name of the Rose (Italy/Germany/France 1986) is “about,” we usually mean “what’s the relevance?” (Nazis? Red Brigades? Liberal impotence in times of terrorism? Parallels enforced by the color-coding which equates Benedictines with Blackshirts and by the casting of Sean Connery in the role of tainted liberal). When Film Comment interviewed F. Murray Abraham about his role as the Inquisitor, Abraham talked exclusively and automatically about Nazis (Bachmann 16-20).

If we ask what The Navigator is about, the most obvious answers are AIDS, environmental and spiritual devastation, and the ills of modern technology. While Braveheart gets an occasional fact right—some of the tactics at Stirling Bridge, for example, or the carnival elements of medieval executions—historical chronicle is not the mode in which it operates, its occasional ventures into accuracy serving only to license critical abuse. Its subject, clearly signaled, is not Scotland in the 1290s but Ireland and the rest of the Celtic fringe in the 1990s, prominently including Scotland, that “nation colonized by wankers” memorialized in Trainspotting (UK 1996), Braveheart’s anti-heroic bookend. Why else has Wallace been given a fictive Irish colleague devoted to talking—in conspicuously modern dialect—about the liberation of his island? Why else does Wallace paint his face with the colors of a Scottish football supporter and lead an army that resembles nothing so much as a soccer crowd on the terraces at Ibrox Park? This war is the continuation of football by other means. Of course, Wallace’s appeals to “Freedom” are anachronistic; surely in the context of so many proleptic reference—even down to the substitution of Irish pipes for Scottish on the soundtrack—they are meant to be? The opening line of the film’s voice-over warns us that this is not so much a true story (though “some say” it is) as a contending fiction. It is a fiction, however, which acts by almost allegorical substitution: thirteenth-century struggles do not lead to twentieth-century ones, but mirror them. The real connection is through an ahistorical essentialism: the English always torment the Scots because it is in their eternal, sexually inadequate nature to do so; Celts resist so erratically because it is in their lovable, virile but shambolic nature to do so. Ever and always. Superficial changes of technology or dress serve only as distancing devices, allowing a Scottish audience in particular to see with renewed clarity what might be hidden behind a common currency. The past is the present and so, by an obvious extrapolation, is the future. Or, in the Welles version, “the charm’s wound up”; the plot—ever and always—loops back to its beginning.

The difference between the modes of modern and medieval historical films can be summarized in a brief example. When Daniel Vigne shot The Return of Martin Guerre in its original sixteenth-century context, he
treated it as a timeless parable of acting and identity. Natalie Zemon Davis, who collaborated on but later rejected the film, says that she wrote her later study, in fact, “to dig deeper into the case, to make historical sense of it” (Davis 8). When that story is remade as Sommersby (1993) and is reset in the post-Civil War American south, its hero becomes an early proponent of racial integration and agricultural cooperatives persecuted mainly for his progressive views; i.e., he is historicized as an agent of social evolution; he is located in linear history as part of that fable of progress so common to films of recent history—think, for example, of Glory, Little Women, The Age of Innocence, or virtually any Merchant-Ivory film—and so strikingly absent from medieval films. When you think of the distant past as an estranged equivalent to the present (as Welles does) or as superior to it by virtue of faith (as Ward does), you are unlikely to think of history in terms of progress or indeed of any kind of linear development whatsoever. Having positioned his film at a point of historical change—the triumph of Christianity over the chthonic forces represented by the Witches—Welles is compelled by the conservatism of his vision not only to make the Holy Father nearly as barbarous as what he opposes but to kill off the supposed winner so that the Witches can have the last word, which is, of course, that nothing has changed.

Such a version of history inevitably entails some losses; in the case of Welles's Macbeth, those losses include Shakespeare, that awkward Renaissance intervention in the otherwise seamless connection of ancient barbarism with modern. As is widely recognized, Welles largely excludes references to the play's Elizabethan cosmology and historiography. He not only marginalizes the saintly King Edward even more than the original play does, but, as we have seen, substitutes a closed loop of evil begetting further evil for the providential pattern by which the natural order expels Macbeth in order to return to its proper condition, and by which Macbeth's crimes beget the line of Banquo, stable kingship, and the eventual union of Scotland and England. Shakespearean providentialism, however severely qualified it is in the play, fits awkwardly with the film's simplified and ahistorical primitivism. As a result, Shakespeare is present in the film mostly as a transmitter of messages from the unconscious translated into the Viennese of Welles's psychologizing and as a dignifying pretext for the substitution of Welles's cruder cosmology. “Scotland,” a notional and subjective place, is thus rescued from Elizabethan as well as medieval history and relocated in the same timeless landscape as the Godot-influenced opening scenes of The Seventh Seal with its two chivalric tramps bereft on the barren shore of '50s high modernism. And, yes, that does seem to me a form of solipsism (as well as a rejection of the work of memory) that is common to the genre of medieval film, at least in part because of the influence of Welles filtered through Bergman.3

Notes

1. See especially The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987) and, of course, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Johns Hopkins, 1973).
2. Davis's full account both locates the original story in the specific context of the peasant culture of Foix in the 1550s and treats it as a chapter in the evolution of gender identities and what she regards as Protestant attitudes toward clerical authority.
3. An earlier version of this paper was read at Shakespeare on Screen: The Centenary Conference, Malaga, Spain, 21-24 September 1999. Four paragraphs of this article appeared in slightly different form in my article “The Ahistoricism of Medieval Film,” in the electronic journal Screening the Past 3 (May 1998), URL: <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/www/screeningthepast/>.

Works Cited


**Criticism: Production Reviews: David G. Hale (essay date 2001)**


[In the following essay, Hale discusses Macbeth’s final act in various televised and cinematic versions of the play, many of which suggest a less positive conclusion than Shakespeare’s original text provides.]

Critical attention to the nature of ending in drama has been with us at least since Aristotle defined an end as “that which is inevitably or, as a rule, the natural result of something else but from which nothing else follows …” (*Poetics* 2.5; trans. Fyfe 31). Some sort of re-established family and/or political order is represented to indicate that an appropriate stopping point has been reached. This component of plot partially defines the difference between tragedy and history and their respective truths. In practice, however, literature (and not just modern and postmodern) has a great many endings which wholly or partially depart from Aristotelian completion. This is especially true of plays which, like Greek tragedy, derive from what is thought to be history. In Aristotle's favorite example, Sophocles's *Oedipus*, the plot is complete in that the Theban plague has been dealt with by identifying the murderer of King Laius, leaving Creon to pick up the pieces. The appearance of Antigone and Ismene and the references to Oedipus's sons, however, remind us that the story of Thebes will continue, going from bad to much worse.

Shifting quickly to Shakespeare, we see a considerable variety in the balance of present order and future disorder at the ends of the histories and tragedies. Most positively, at the end of *Richard III*, the victorious Richmond promises “smooth- fac'd peace, / With smiling plenty, and fair prosperous days!” (5.5.33-34). In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Caesar predicts that “The time of universal peace is near” (4.6.4), anticipating both the pax Augustana and the peace promised through the birth of Christ in his reign. In *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, Fortinbras and Edgar move into vacuums created by the annihilation of the ruling families and have relatively clean slates with which to work, a basically neutral situation. *Henry V* and *Henry VI, Part 3* end with assertions of peace which are substantially qualified. *Henry V* has great hopes for diplomacy and marriage: “And may our oaths well kept and prosp'rous be,” a promise which the Chorus immediately reminds us is not kept (H5 5.2.374). For Edward IV, “Here I hope begins our lasting joy”; the audience remembers Richard of Gloucester's earlier soliloquy about getting the crown (3H6 5.7.46, 3.2.124-95). At the end of *Richard II*, the new King Henry IV faces all sorts of problems including guilt for Richard's murder, the Bishop of Carlisle's prophecy, Northumberland's possible perception of ingratitude, and Henry's "unthrifty son." Similarly, *Julius Caesar* ends with a recognition of future conflict between Antony and Octavius Caesar. The extreme case, *Troilus and Cressida*, ends with the death of Hector, making inevitable the fall of Troy.
I wish to consider *Macbeth*, about which critics and directors are of two minds as to where to place the ending of the play on the spectrum of future order and disorder. Read simply, the text seems to place itself at the positive end, with peace and political legitimacy restored after Macbeth's interval of usurpation and tyranny. Some critics and directors, however, have found ways to qualify a harmonious ending by suggesting the continuity of history—that something negative necessarily or probably will follow the end of the play. I shall summarize briefly the restorative elements in the text and main arguments of the critics before considering how restoration is undercut in many of the performances available on video for research and teaching. These performances use the reappearance of previously established characters, primarily the Witches but also, and unhistorically, Donalbain and Fleance. Reinserting the tragic plot into its historical sources authorizes using history to comment on the results of this procedure.

Opposition to Macbeth includes three elements: the Scottish-English army, criticism of Macbeth's tyranny in both general and specific terms, and characterization of a positive alternative for Scotland. The first substantial statement of the positive comes from an anonymous Lord in act 3, scene 5. That Macbeth “holds the due of birth” from Malcolm indicates the priority of legitimate inheritance (3.5.25). From Macbeth's overthrow the Scots may again

*Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights;*
*Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives;*
*Do faithful homage and receive free honors;*
*All which we pine for now. (3.5.34-37)*

These images encapsulate motifs from earlier in the play which define a vision of a restored future. As the forces assemble, Caithness adds a traditional medical metaphor:

*Well, march we on*
*To give obedience where 'tis truly ow'd.*
*Meet we the med'cine of the sickly weal,*
*And with him pour we, in our country's purge,*
*Each drop of us. (5.2.25-29)*

In the next scene Macbeth ironically echoes this metaphor when he wishes the Doctor could “purge [my land] to a sound and pristine health,” which is exactly what Caithness and the others have in mind (5.3.53). As the army approaches Dunsinane, Malcolm “hope[s] the days are near at hand / That chambers will be safe,” alluding to the chamber in which Duncan and his grooms were murdered (5.4.1-2). In the closing minutes of the play, Macduff displays “th' usurper's cursed head,” asserts that “the time is free,” and addresses Malcolm: “Hail, King of Scotland!” (5.9.21, 25). This is repeated by the on-stage thanes, a positive alternative to the more problematic salutations by the Witches and others earlier in the play. It is the “faithful homage” the Lord wished for in act 3 (5.36). His “receive free honors” is realized when Malcolm creates Scotland's first earls (5.9.28-30). He then proposes to call “home our exil'd friends abroad,” mentioning no names, although Donalbain and Fleance are possibilities in the text. He also proposes justice for Macbeth's “cruel ministers,” also unnamed, although Seyton and the murderers of Banquo and Lady Macduff are possibilities. Malcolm concludes by inviting everyone to his coronation at Scone, the next step in the restoration of social and political order which have been hoped for since act 3.

A variety of critics in the last two decades have found ways of qualifying or undercutting the ending. For instance, Janet Adelman writes (or complains) that “the natural order of the end depends on this excision of the female” (145). The deaths of Lady Macduff and Lady Macbeth mean that there are no women involved in
(or available for) the restoration of order, which is therefore unnatural. As a convenient recent example, Deborah Willis lists other reasons why “a truly restorative alternative for Scotland is not forthcoming” (235-36). Malcolm is young and inexperienced; his “healing” is military, not the magic of Edward the Confessor in England. She regards the creation of earls as “an empty, inflationary move,” and sees “inner tensions” in an “honor-driven patronage system controlled by the king” and dependent on “the vicissitudes of patrilinearity.” Therefore “the collaboration of witches and traitors is one of [the] predictable byproducts” of Malcolm’s rule.

It is quite possible to end the play without indicating future problems. Among the video-taped performances which do so are these directed by and starring Maurice Evans (1954), Trevor Nunn with Ian McKellen (1979), and Charles Warren with Michael Jayston (1988). Many more performances make some effort to illustrate one kind of political instability at the end. The most common approach is, as Willis and others notice, to bring back the Witches. Although they have not been seen since act 4, scene 1, Macbeth refers to them constantly thereafter, including his last appearance in act 5:

[MACBETH.]

And be these juggling fiends no more believd,
That palter with us in a double sense,
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope.

(5.8.19-22)

The present tense signals that the Witches remain alive and presumably capable of further words of promise. Macbeth’s phrasing suggests that someone else may indeed believe “these juggling fiends.” Malcolm’s concluding speech does not mention doing anything about them; he may not know of their existence. They certainly do not receive the fate of Margery Jordan in Henry VI, Part 2 (2.3) or the Scottish witches whose burning during the earlier reign of King Duff is recorded by Holinshed (Bullough 7.480).

The simplest approach is exemplified by John Gorrie’s 1970 BBC production with Eric Porter. The last scene is set in the courtyard of the castle. As Malcolm and the new earls exit stage left, the camera pans in the opposite direction to an open door through which the Witches are looking. The camera slowly zooms to them as the credits roll. Confirmation of their presence is enough. A slightly more substantial use of the Witches is in Sarah Caldwell’s Lincoln Center production (1981). The two female Witches (the third is played by a man who doubles as a soldier) enter armed as soldiers, meet at center stage during the final tableau, touch shields, and exit. Their participation in the battle has not directly influenced its outcome, but their presence indicates a contribution and implies a future role for them (also Rosenberg 654-55).

The fullest appearance by the Witches is in Arthur Allan Seidelman’s Bard production (1981) in which the three Witches and their three male familiars appear on the balcony above and cheer on the Anglo-Scots army in act 5, scene 3. The Witches are back to enjoy the combat between Macbeth and Macduff. At “from his mother’s womb / Untimely ripp’d,” two familiars grab Macbeth’s legs, indicating the paralyzing effect of Macduff’s words (5.8.15-16). During the final tableau, with Malcolm and Siward on the balcony, the Witches weave unnoticed through the crowd, signifying their permeation of the Scottish aristocracy. Two familiars climb ladders, signifying future political ambition.

Roman Polanski’s film (1971) combines the Witches and Donalbain. Although the text specifies that Donalbain is not present for the assault on Dunsinane (5.2.6-7), Polanski brings him back from Ireland. After
the salutation of Malcolm as king, Donalbain travels, glaring and limping like Richard III, through the rainy countryside for his own meeting with the Witches at the place where Macbeth found them in act 4 (Jorgens 168; Croll 24; Pearlman 255; Petersen 40-41). The Witches' chanting is heard faintly. Like Macbeth, Donalbain clearly knows where and why to seek them. Several critics see the tradition of Jan Kott in this epilogue, continuing the political violence in another cycle more or less like that begun when the witches hailed Macbeth. Kott himself, however, distinguishes the “Grand Mechanism” of the English histories from the nightmare of Macbeth, from which it is possible to awaken (75-79).

I would also suggest that Polanski is giving us another bit of the historical foreshortening which characterizes the play generally. According to Holinshed, Donalbain (Donald Bane) remained in Ireland through his brother's long and generally successful reign (1057-92), but returned after his death and became king, temporarily dispossessing Malcolm's sons. Donalbain might be hailed by the Witches as “King hereafter” but follow Macbeth's view that “chance may crown me / Without my stir” (1.3.143-44). The historical King Donald was initially regarded as an improvement over Malcolm, who was thought to have brought in too many English refinements (“riotous maners and superfluous gormandizing”), a view hinted at in Macbeth's jibe about “English epicures” (Holinshed sig. P6v; 5.3.8). As several critics have pointed out, Polanski further destabilizes the accession of Malcolm by assigning the presentation of the crown to Rosse, the political opportunist whom Polanski involves in the murders of Banquo and Lady Macduff, deserting Macbeth only when he is not rewarded for the slaughter at Macduff’s castle (Pearlman 254-55).

The Witches and Fleance have roles at the ends of Orson Welles's film (1948) and Jack Gold's BBC production (1983), as well as other stage productions (Piatt 23). Gold's Witches are limited to appearing briefly in silhouette before the battle. In the last scene, Macbeth's body is at the foot of the throne. Macduff has given Malcolm the crown which he has picked up after Macbeth's death. Standing over the body of Macbeth is Fleance, who has not been heard of since he escaped being murdered in act 3. He has been present for the revenge which Banquo commanded, though not directly involved (3.3.18). As he looks back to Malcolm, the camera cuts to a series of head and shoulder shots of the earls. Recognizing a threat in Fleance, Malcolm nervously lowers a little the crown he has been holding. The final shot, with ominous music, is Fleance looking back to Malcolm.

Welles's film involves the Witches in two ways and has two appearances by Fleance. The death of Macbeth is represented by the decapitation of the Witches' crowned doll, which has appeared frequently before. After the enthusiastic hailing of King Malcolm by the thanes, the camera dissolves to a long shot of the castle, then pulls back to behind the Witches with their pronged staves looking at the castle. After a dissolve to clouds, we have a medium shot of the Witches, one speaking the relocated line “Peace, the charm's wound up” (1.3.37), paltering in a double sense that their charm on Macbeth has ended and that a new one has been created.

A youthful Fleance first appears between the Holy Father and Siward when the besieging army approaches the walls of Dunsinane to be mocked by Macbeth (5.5.1-4). Siward pulls Fleance to safety as Macbeth kills the Holy Father by throwing his spearlike scepter. Later, in a jumble of images, the crown from the doll becomes Macbeth's crown, bouncing at Fleance's feet. During the enthusiastic hailing of Malcolm, there is a quick shot of Fleance holding the crown and looking impassively upward (Kliman 28, 30). If the Witches have wound up a new charm, is it for Malcolm or Fleance? The Witches predicted to Banquo that “Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none” (1.3.67). Welles and Gold suggest that Fleance will or wishes to be the fulfillment of this prophecy.

The historical problem with using Fleance emerges from Holinshed:

Fleance … fled into Wales … at length also he came into such familiar acquaintance with the said princes daughter, that she of courtesie in the end suffered him to get hir with child; which being once understood, hir father the prince conceived such hatefull displeasure towards
Fleance, that he finallie slue him. …

(sigs. P2v-3; summarized by Bullough 7.499)

Although the child, known as Walter the Steward/Stewart, works out well enough, Fleance's activities in Wales suggest why Shakespeare ignores him in the second half of the play, not a reason why he might reappear at the end (cf. Rosenberg 653).

The reappearances of Donalbain and Fleance may also be regarded as surrogates for the initial difficulty King Malcolm III had establishing his rule. As Holinshed reports,

Thus while Malcolme was busied in setting orders amongst his subjects, tidings came that one Lugtake surnamed the foole, being either the sonne, or (as some write) the coosen of the late mentioned Makbeth, was conveied with a great number of such had taken part with the said Makbeth unto Scone, and there by their support received the crowne, as lawful inheritor thereto.

(sig. P4v; summarized by Bullough 7.433)

This Lugtake, or Lulach, was in fact Macbeth's stepson, the child of Lady Macbeth's first marriage to Gillacomagin, Mormaer of Maray (Bullough 7.433). If one wishes an answer to the question how many children had Lady Macbeth, at least this one. According to Holinshed, Macduff, now earl of Fife, defeated Lugtake's forces and killed him in 1058. Macduff turns out to be more reliable than the two Thanes of Cawdor.

In these performances, the other potential problems seen by recent critics such as Adelman and Willis do not appear and would be difficult to justify historically. For example, Willis's contrasting the magic healing of King Edward the Confessor needs tempering by the fact that Edward's death left an unsettled political situation leading the Norman Conquest in 1066. Adelman's view about “eliminating the female” (146), especially in any positive sense, might be balanced by knowledge that Malcolm married the woman now known as St. Margaret of Scotland, whose chapel may be seen at Edinburgh Castle (Mackay). Three of her six sons eventually reigned in Scotland; a daughter and a granddaughter were queens of England. I am not aware of a production which introduces her, but she could appear in some of act 4, scene 3, with Malcolm in England where he first met her, or in the last scene. A similar expansion of a woman's role is in Richard Loncraine's recent film of Richard III, in which Princess Elizabeth of York is on camera frequently throughout; her wedding is celebrated and consummated just before the ultimate battle.

Contemporary critics who see many possible kinds of instability as the consequence of the end of Macbeth represent a widespread tendency to suspect the promises and performances of political leaders. Some of these suspicions appear in many productions using the Witches, Donalbain, and Fleance to blur the distinction between the ending of a tragic plot and the continuity of history. Consideration of Shakespeare's historical sources suggests the limits to some of these stagings.

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The nemesis of tragic drama is not comedy—which also rests on a doubt of human powers—but melodrama. Melodrama reduces our sinful excellence to an unmixed, therefore untestable and unalterable, criminality or virtue. And its “happy” outcome arouses, not fear or pity—which comedy parries only with lucky blunders—but recklessness and self-approval, for melodrama assumes that men can act wholly outside evil, and so triumph over it without a self-defeat. Melodrama is what happens when tragic writing tires of common humanity.

The “story” of Macbeth conspicuously invites such a fatigue. Its murders are gross and frequent, and, though realized or alluded to in passionate language, they are not humanized by the passional. But the “story” is not a given against which Shakespeare had to contend. As Arthur Quiller-Couch pointed out, “instead of extenuating Macbeth's criminality [which the sources of the story gave him warrant to do] Shakespeare doubles and redoubles it.” He omits almost every event Holinshed's Chronicle suggests for pardoning Macbeth, and grasps much that imagination can provide to damn him. Yet the play is tragedy, not melodrama; we are never thoroughly alienated from its protagonist. How Shakespeare went about preventing this alienation is the particular form of the play: its representation of some events, its narration of others; its use in some scenes of agents rather than the protagonist himself; its evocation of witchcraft and prophecy to magnify the power of evil; its suggestion of passional motives through Macbeth's relation to his wife. Above all, in maintaining what has been called Macbeth's “unrealistic” sensitivity—his “normal” reactions—to crimes that “should” harden him, Shakespeare joins his protagonist to common humanity. But this has been pointed out before, and it is useless to ballast arguments that already sink under agreement. Rather one ought to ask why Shakespeare chose to work so much at odds with himself, to pile up the very difficulties he would have to overcome.

One partial answer is that this is the essential strategy of art. But Oedipus Rex is no less an achievement because Sophocles places the crimes of his protagonist outside the dramatic time of the play. Another partial answer is that Macbeth is a virtuoso-piece. But this is more description than explanation. One must account for the choice of materials, and the butcheries of a Scottish tyrant hardly suggest themselves as inevitable matter for a jeu d'esprit. The primary answer lies elsewhere, specifically in one of Shakespeare's tactics for keeping Macbeth inside the pale of humanity. At significant points in the play he lowers the horizon of behavior against which Macbeth's crimes are to be judged.

There are at least two scenes which have this alteration of scale as their primary function: the Porter's scene, and the interview between Malcolm and Macduff. The Porter's scene puts before us the pervasive criminality of men. It occurs immediately after the murder of Duncan (benefactor, guest, King), when Macbeth seems most divorced from common humanity. The Porter's lurching and delay remind us that no Lady Macbeth, no conspiring evil, is needed to transform “memory, the warder of the brain,” into a “fume,” disarming duty. Man's nature, “uncultivated,” is a ready accessory to the fact of evil. But this is not the most relevant point of the scene. “If a man were porter of hell gate [says the Porter] he should have old turning of the key,” “old” here meaning tiresomely frequent, and with such a frequency as to call up the final adjective that describes the mortal career. Both Macbeth and his wife have found their way to Hell by extraordinary crimes, but the Porter insists on how many more death will undo. His “Have napkins enow about you; here you'll sweat for it,” reduces to the commonplace and domestic a damnation we have been viewing as spectacularly outside...
ordinary experience. The Porter tells us that he had “thought to let in some of all professions …” and, concluding the scene, he says, now speaking to us directly: “I pray you remember the porter.” We are to applaud him as actor, to tip him as Porter on our own ways to Hell, and to refrain from the self-indulgence of imagining ourselves wholly outside the frame of the play, only observers at a spectacle.

Similar inferences may be drawn from the interview between Malcolm and Macduff. The scene is subtitled in commentary “the testing of Macduff.” But the course of the fable does not necessitate this testing. Malcolm does not yet know of the murder of Macduff's children (nor does Macduff), nor does Malcolm know of the development of Macduff's opposition to the tyrant. But what should control the decision to present scenes in drama is not what the characters, but what the audience must know. The marshalling of forces against Macbeth might well have proceeded without the testing scene, though it occurs in Holinshed. To us the motives for an alliance between Malcolm and Macduff are clear enough. So the function of the scene must lie not so much in furthering what must occur, as in specifying how we are to look at it. The testing of Macduff and the manner and extent of that testing prompt us to see Macbeth's crimes against a lowered horizon of human behavior.

Malcolm's first speech:

Let us seek out some desolate shade, and there
Weep our sad bosoms empty.

has the precise accent of moral enervation we associate with Richard II at the moments he is least capable of rule. (The scene is also a testing of Malcolm as future ruler.) And Macduff's reply, urging action when

New widows howl, new orphans cry. ... 

forces us to raise again the question of Macduff's responsibility in exposing the lives of his wife and children. These lines do not permit us to grant him the extenuation of a lack of foresight. Further, Malcolm's distrust of Macduff exemplifies that general and well-grounded suspicion of men toward one another, a suspicion whose pathology in Macbeth is a matter of degree, not kind. When Malcolm goes on to say that:

A good and virtuous nature may recoil
In an imperial charge,

he points to a pervasive human weakness. But the richness of the last phrase and especially the ambiguity of the preposition, allow us to connect this weakness with Macbeth's own fall under the pressure of the idea of power.

The passages following are full of Malcolm's self-accusations. Beside him, he states, “black Macbeth / Will seem as pure as snow.” Malcolm's catalogue of vices is significant in what it specifies (a state of mind to be inferred also from Hamlet's similar self-accusations as he “tests” Ophelia in III, i, 121 ff.) but even more significant in its premises as a mode of testing Macduff. Ultimately Macduff “passes” the test; that is, he rejects Malcolm, the self-invented monster, as unfit to rule. Yet we are made to observe how many evils a man of more than ordinary goodness—active, not merely docile, goodness—will tolerate and connive at before he stands fast. Is Malcolm a very “cistern” of lust? Why, then, Macduff responds, he may “convey (his) pleasures in a spacious plenty,” covering them with hypocrisy, for Scotland “has willing dames enough.” Is Malcolm avaricious, would he destroy his nobles for their lands, set thane against thane for the spoils of confiscation? Why, then, Macduff answers, “Scotland hath foisons to fill up” the desires of such a man.

Just as important as Macduff's willingness to accept Malcolm's vices is the tone of bland hypocrisy this acceptance entails. He quotes copybook maxims at Malcolm: “Boundless intemperance / In nature is a
tyranny.” “This avarice / Sticks deeper, grows with more pernicious root / Than summer-seeming lust.” His stance is that of Macbeth at the outset of the play. The exchange between Macduff and Malcolm goes on so long that it has seemed to some to disrupt the moral alignments of the fable. Many acted versions of the play omit the scene as an embarrassment to the melodramatic sweep of the concluding action. So it is. For what emerges from it is Malcolm's premise (not only his suspicion, but his certainty, of how far “good” men will go in accepting and conniving at evil), and a justification of that premise (how far Macduff actually does go). The scene precisely fixes the behavioral scale of the play, and it does so only shortly before we are to make our final evaluation of Macbeth.

In addition to these particular scenes, there are other means by which Shakespeare lowers the behavioral horizon in Macbeth. The stage is almost continually dark; evil spreads, as in the single medium of a pool, from protagonist to agent, from agent to event. The “good” characters in the play (with perhaps one exception), are specifically tainted, and the taint in several well-known passages is generalized to include all mankind. It would be superfluous to say more of Macduff or to do more than allude to the understandable, and perhaps barely pardonable, flight of Malcolm, which finds an ironic echo of the enervated opening speech of the “testing” scene. More crucial are the cases of Banquo and Duncan.

Banquo's initial reaction to the murder is the speech which ends:

In the great hand of God I stand, and thence
Against the undivulg'd pretence I fight
Of treasonous malice.

But his second reaction, incorporating the near-certainty of Macbeth's guilt, is that if the witches told the truth to Macbeth,

(As upon thee, Macbeth, their speeches shine),
Why, by the verities on thee made good,
May they not be my oracles as well
And set me up in hope?

One must first observe here Banquo's confusion of “fair” and “foul” in the verb “shine.” But he ventures not only this slight movement into the inverted imagery of evil; he also expresses, as Bradley pointed out, an attitude similar to that of Macbeth in Act I, and a willingness to profit from evil. This last is apparent in the “mouth-honour,” of his next speech to Macbeth:

Let your Highness
Command upon me, to the which my duties
Are with a most indissoluble tie
For ever knit.

Though unintentional on Banquo's part, there is a suggestiveness in a later speech that can be no accident of the poet's hand in a play whose imagery of light and dark is so consistently wrought. Banquo has indeed become “a borrower of the night.” That Banquo is an active danger to Macbeth is something we do not learn from the man himself. By neither word nor deed does Banquo express clear opposition, though he fears Macbeth's guilt. After the murder his virtue is all in the mouths of others.

Further, though he states more clearly and emphatically than Macbeth the evil possibilities in the witches' predictions, though he warns Macbeth that he intends to keep

My bosom franchis'd and allegiance clear,
before the murder he is not proof against awful images, those “cursed thoughts” he calls on “merciful powers” to restrain. He is not proof against them because these are the thoughts that human “nature gives way to in repose.” Moreover, with Macbeth, he shares the mixed impression made on us by the Sergeant's speech in I, ii. Like Macbeth, he has defended the crown in the defeat of the traitor Macdonwald. But like Macbeth's, his eager violence moves the Sergeant to describe him as apparently intending “to bathe in reeking wounds, / Or memorize another Golgotha.” We must see him, therefore, not only as a good man whose active nature sometimes resists evil, sometimes not, but as the human being whose nature “in repose” is full of latent evil, and whose activity, even in a just cause, can be morally ambiguous.

If there is a representation of some polar good in the play it is Duncan. That he is murdered at the outset of Macbeth, that Cordelia survives until the last act of Lear, and that Edgar, Kent, and the Fool function throughout it, are summaries of the difference in the structures and themes of the plays. But Duncan's presence as a behavioral standard is brief indeed, and he has no surrogate. Malcolm is not wholly his successor, nor his equal in spirituality. The testing of Macduff raises doubts about the plausibility of Malcolm's character. Shakespeare tries to keep these doubts from diverting our attention by putting them into the mouth of Macduff.

Such welcome and unwelcome things at once
'Tis hard to reconcile.

But though this speech makes the scene appear more plausible, it does not satisfy our questions about Malcolm. The subsequent dialogue on the cure of King's Evil through the royal “touch” only avoids, it does not still, these doubts. The purpose of this passage on the King's Evil is, I think, primarily to convey the tactful compliment to James I that scholars have seen in it. Such a compliment might well have been thought necessary after the peculiar light in which the “testing” scene had placed the character of James' predecessor on the Scottish throne. But to argue that the passage on the King's Evil implies a moral coherence in Malcolm's character is, I think, to miss the effect of its introduction of the idea of transcendental sources of power. Insofar as such power is accorded royalty, it is to be seen as distinct from the human weakness Malcolm exhibits. It is the Malcolm the man in whom we find perfect chastity and truth “difficult to reconcile” with his flight, with the premises of his self-accusation, and with the “testing” of Macduff. And this “testing”—“tempting” is an equally good word—it is no great distortion to describe, inverting Malcolm's words of self-justification, as something like an attempt to “betray / The devil to his fellow.” But if one sees imperfect humanity in Malcolm, perhaps one sees it also in Duncan.

Shakespeare has not wholly transformed the politician of the Chronicle into the holy image of royalty embedded in so much of the imagery associated with Duncan. Holinshed's inept King shows behind the behavior and language of grace, however faintly. Duncan's speech to Macbeth:

The sin of my ingratitude even now
Was heavy on me.

contains not only the dramatic irony Walker points out. It is also inappropriate in the light of the rewards already given Macbeth; its language is far too strong. However, immediately after the praises of Macbeth and the promise of still further honors for him, Duncan “establishes” his estate on Malcolm. The question of elective succession to the throne is not emphasized (for this would tend to justify Macbeth's claim to the throne and thus in some slight measure extenuate his guilt). Yet it is clear that Duncan has chosen this particular moment to insure Malcolm's ascendancy. Kittredge calls the choice “an irony of fate.” Yet, to quote Kittredge further, Duncan takes occasion to signalize his joy over Macbeth's victories by nominating Malcolm. Is this only “fate” in a play where supernatural agency is so carefully controlled, or is it some slight memory of the ineptness described in the Chronicles? Or does the choice of this moment to elevate Malcolm, coupled with the excessive feeling of “sin” and “ingratitude,” suggest, however faintly, a moral
defensiveness? If this last possibility is going too far, it is not too much to assert that there is a secular dimension in Duncan and that in this he exhibits some imperfection that exposes men to Fortune. Whatever may be said of this aspect of Duncan's behavior, the fact is that the behavioral scale of the play is not set by him, and that against the pervasive scale of behavior, Macbeth, though “black Macbeth,” is not wholly alienated from his fellows. The “mouth-honour” of the courtiers, the desperate sadism of the murderers, the “ambition” of his wife, and the minor advantage-seeking of underlings show how much Macbeth partakes of the play's other characters and they of him. What he looms blackest against is the light of his own conscience—a light often feeble in others. So much has been made of the meaning of the “delays” in Hamlet, that one must struggle to recall that in Macbeth, too, a King's foul murder is long unpaid for.

The behavioral scale of the play is also lowered by “chance” remarks. Most of these, like some already cited, suggest the sinfulness of man's “nature in repose.” (A major irony of the play is that for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, once their crimes have begun, it is the active mind which seeks evil; the mind in repose—in dream or rapt inwardness—gropes toward the good of remorse. So do guilt and pity indeed stride the blast of sin.) But, crucially, before the murder of Macduff's children we learn from a babe's mouth that in this world the liars and swearers are fools; for there are liars and swearers enow to beat the honest men and hang up them.

And, brooding over his crimes, Macbeth tells us how “Blood hath been shed ere now … and since too,” and that what distinguishes his offense is that in his case (“now”), the bleeding ghosts return. The whole strategy we have been discussing is summarized in this speech. Macbeth's criminality is not shown as a special horror that alienates him from historical man. His story is unusual because of what unites him with moral man—the anguish of conscience. In part, through this strategy, which required some “graying” of common humanity, some “whitening” of Macbeth, Shakespeare managed to prevent a tragedy from lapsing into melodrama.

But the strategy was not employed merely for the sake of the dramatic problem it solved. Rather, I think, Shakespeare undertook the dramatic problem for the sake of the strategy. Though it insists on the painfulness of Lear's evolution and Edgar's, even Lear deals in polarities—in an apparent, fixed good (Cordelia, Kent) and an apparent, fixed evil (Goneril, Regan). We can distinguish clearly the Sanely Vile from the Impractically or Madly Good. In Lear we are provided with as many of the comforts of melodrama as a great tragedy may safely contain. And we want such comforts, for the reduction of men to melodrama's mere “forces” mitigates the hard necessities of self-consciousness and choice, which the fable urges. In one respect, therefore, Macbeth is more “painful” than Lear, despite all Lear's suffering, for in Macbeth there are no polar moral figures. Duncan dies almost at once; Macduff's children are mere counters. The play plunges us almost entirely into a world without the narcotic of melodrama; it continually connects the common with the worst, and embodies in that worst our best sensitivities. The crisis of conscience, which in Lear was embodied in ethically “mixed” figures, is shown to be operative in the most extreme of men. The play allows us no vileness in which we cannot recognize the force of our aspirations, and no “common” humanity free of what we believe is monstrous. Thus Macbeth represents a further journey into the natural abyss explored by the earlier tragedy. Its formula, “fair is foul and foul is fair,” refers not only to the deceptiveness of appearances, but to a moral ambivalence that is made to seem permanent. At a time when Bonn, Jerusalem, and Washington alike seek in an Eichmann self-absolving images, it is possibly useful to recall that Shakespeare, conjuring up the visage of Macbeth, saw in it something of Everyman.

Criticism: Themes: Dennis Biggins (essay date 1976)

In the following essay, Biggins studies the links between sex and violence in Macbeth, as well as the association of both with the Weird Sisters.

The consensus of critical opinion appears to be that sexuality has little structural or thematic importance in Macbeth. Thus, for example, a recent critic can refer to the play as “the purest of Shakespeare's tragedies,” in which the Porter's remarks about drink and sex might easily seem incongruous.¹ Some later writers, however, have drawn attention to a sexual element in the exchanges between Macbeth and his wife. Jan Kott remarks that Lady Macbeth “demands murder from Macbeth as a confirmation of his manhood, almost as an act of love,” and that the “two are sexually obsessed with each other.” Ian Robinson sees a perverse passion as the source of Lady Macbeth's influence over her husband in the murders of Duncan and Banquo: “the scene in which Banquo's murder is envisaged is a kind of love-passage between the Macbeths of which the natural consummation is the murder.” D. F. Rauber comments on Lady Macbeth's strategy of questioning Macbeth's manliness in I.vii: “Her attack is saturated with sexuality, and her main weapon is clearly a kind of sexual blackmail: ‘From this time / Such I account thy love’ (I.vii.38-39).”² These are valuable perceptions, but they are mostly isolated and incidental to the critics' main purposes. It is my chief contention in this paper that there are important structural and thematic links between sexuality and the various manifestations of violence in Macbeth; moreover, that these in turn are associated significantly with Shakespeare's dramatized treatment of witchcraft.

The atmosphere of upheaval peculiar to the Macbeth world is partly created by Shakespeare's evoking violence in terms of sexual behavior and of the supernatural, both seen as perverted and disordered. This evocation is poetically appropriate: if Duncan (and, more equivocally, Banquo) represents the good with its potential for beneficent increase in a divinely sanctioned world-order, then Macbeth and his wife, who reject that order, are fittingly characterized in terms of the sexually aberrant and unfruitful.

In the first place, there are some passages in the Weird Sisters' speeches whose full purport has not been grasped. Everybody agrees that the Weird Sisters are something other, or at any rate something more, than the malevolent old women of Jacobean witch superstitition—they are Lamb's “foul anomalies”—yet many of their characteristics are those traditionally associated with European witchcraft. They are not simply common- or garden-variety witches of the kind described by contemporary witch lore, as Thomas Alfred Spalding alleged (although he rightfully rejected the view that they are Norns). There is a demonic aspect of the Weird Sisters, but their powers are too limited for them to be seen in Walter Clyde Curry's terms as full-fledged demons or devils.³ They occupy a kind of twilight territory between human and supernatural evildoing. Arthur R. McGee observes that there is much evidence that to Shakespeare's contemporaries “witches, Furies, devils and fairies were virtually synonymous.”⁴ Nevertheless Shakespeare carefully avoids portraying a Macbeth helplessly caught in the grip of irresistible demonic forces; the Weird Sisters' malice is evident in all their traffickings with him, yet nowhere are we shown invincible proof of their power over him. As Robert H. West puts it:

The almost self-evident truth is that we simply cannot be sure of much about the Weird Sisters, though beyond a reasonable doubt they are representations of some genuinely superhuman evil. … [Shakespeare] treat[s] both Macbeth's fall and the Weird Sisters' part in it as awesome mysteries to the ignorant and the learned alike—mysteries that we may all feel and in part observe, but for which not even the most knowledgeable have a sufficient formula.⁵

Although the Weird Sisters may wear their witchcraft with a difference, they nonetheless exhibit many of its trappings. What has not hitherto been noticed is their claims to participation in those sexual malpractices which are standard evidences of witchcraft with the demonologists. In I.iii the First Witch (I use this label for convenience) announces her enmity toward a sailor's wife who had refused her chestnuts. The Witch refers to this woman as a “rumpe-fed Ronyon” (l. 6).⁶ These abusive terms have been variously explained, but they
may be used here to express, among other things, sexual antagonism. As Nares suggested, *rumpe-fed* “means, probably, nothing more than *fed*, or fattened in the *rump*,”7 or full-buttocked. The usual gloss of *ronyon* is “a mangy, scabby creature” (Muir, New Arden ed., p. 12), although the other Shakespearean instance (Wiv., IV.ii.163) couples the word with *witch*, *hag*, *baggage*, and *polecat*, the first two of which are interesting in relation to *Macbeth*, and the last two of which have marked sexual meanings in Elizabethan-Jacobean English, including Shakespeare’s.9 The Witch derisively sees her enemy as a sexual object whose role she intends to usurp, as her later remarks confirm. She states that in retaliation for the slight offered her by the sailor’s wife, she will follow the latter’s husband to Aleppo.

And like a Rat without a tayle,  
Ile doe, Ile doe, and Ile doe.  
.....Ile dreyne him drie as Hay:  
Sleepe shall neyther Night nor Day  
Hang vpon his Pent-house Lid:  
He shall liue a man forbid:  
Wearie Seu'nights, nine times nine,  
Shall he dwindle, peake, and pine:  
Though his Barke cannot be lost,  
Yet it shall be Tempest-tost.

(9-10, 18-25)

There are a number of single or double meanings here that contain sexual components referring specifically to witchcraft or demonic practices. The more or less generally accepted interpretation of these lines is as follows: The Witch will assume rat form in order to creep unobserved aboard the *Tiger*, where she will work evil spells on the ship and its master; she will harass him and waste him away by means of her magic, although she cannot destroy either his vessel or himself. I should not wish to deny that the passage has some such meaning, but this coexists with or is subordinate to meanings heralded by the First Witch’s announcement of her quarrel with the sailor’s wife. Her threats are peculiarly specific in comparison with the Second Witch’s generalized maleficence in killing swine. The key statement here is “Ile dreyne him drie as Hay” (l. 18), which most editors leave unexplained, assuming, apparently, that its meaning is self-evident. Furness, in the New Variorum, quotes Hunter (1853): “This, it was believed, it was in the power of witches to do, as may be seen in any of the narratives of the cases of witchcraft” (p. 35). This is hardly an enlightening comment, possibly owing to the writer’s excessive reticence, although it is unclear whether or not he really understands the line. Dover Wilson, in the New Cambridge edition (p. 101), supposes that the reference is to the Witch’s imposing thirst upon the sailor. This may be its surface meaning. But the line also undoubtedly refers to her intention of draining the unfortunate man of his semen, through her grossly inordinate exploitation of him as a succubus.

The belief that witches and the demons they served and were served by could experience sexual relations with one another or with ordinary mortals of both sexes was an old one. St. Augustine mentions “Silvanos et Panes, quos vulgo incubos vocant … et quosdam daemones, quos Dusios Galli nuncupant,” as having sexual intercourse with women.10 St. Thomas Aquinas explains how offspring may result from the unions of demons with humans:

\[
\text{Si tamen ex coitu daemonum aliqui interdum nascuntur, hoc non est per semen ab eis deciscum, aut a corporibus assumptis, sed per semen alicujus hominis ad hoc acceptum, utpote quod idem daemon qui est succubus ad virum fiat incubus ad mulierem. …}^{11}
\]

Demons, being sexless like angels, could assume either the male or the female role in sexual intercourse with humans, as St. Thomas states, and thus collect as succubi semen from men for later implanting as incubi in women.
Later writers on witchcraft and demonology develop these ideas. In a work commonly known as the *Formicarius* (c. 1435), the German friar Johannes Nider expatiates learnedly on the existence and nature of incubi and succubi. His argument is conducted in the form of a dialogue between Piger and Theologus. The latter explains that the demons who act as incubi and succubi do so out of their malicious joy in harming man's body and soul.

Causa autem quare Daemones se incubos faciunt vel succubos, haec esse videtur, ut per luxuriae vitium hominis utriusque naturam laedant, corporis videlicet, & animae, quae in laesione praeceptuè delectari videntur.\(^{12}\)

The formidable Sprenger and Kramer, who jointly compiled one of the most influential of all European witchcraft treatises, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (c. 1486), see insatiable lust as the driving force in witches' coitus with demons.

Omnia per carnalem concupiscentiam, quae ... in eis est insatiabilis. Prouterb. penultimo, Tria sunt insatiabilia, &c. & quartum quod nunquam dicit, Sufficit, scilicet os vuluae. Vnde & cum Daemonibus, causa explendae libidinis, se agitant.\(^{13}\)

The Weird Sisters have characteristics of both witches and demons, so that there is nothing incongruous in the First Witch's avowed intention of acting as succubus to the sailor, although the treatises on demonology mostly discuss this practice as the work of devils.\(^{14}\) In the colloquy between the Sisters in I.iii there is a mingling of the motifs of unnatural evildoing and of lust that are to recur later in the play with reference to Macbeth and his wife. That “Ile dreyne him drie as Hay” refers to sexual impotence is confirmed by a parallel use of the simile in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. In Book III, canto ix, stanza 5, the narrator comments on the deficiency in the old miser Malbecco that makes him keep a jealous eye on his lovely young wife.

But he is old, and withered like hay,
Vnfit faire Ladies service to supply;
The priuie guilt whereof makes him alway
Suspect her truth, and keepe continuall spy
Vpon her with his other blincked eye;
Ne suffreth he resort of liuing wight
Approch to her, ne keepe her company,
But in close bowre her mewes from all mens sight,
Depriu'ed of kindly ioy and naturall delight.\(^{(15)}\)

The First Witch seeks to render the master of the *Tiger* impotent by sexual exhaustion, so that his wife, too, may be “Depriu'ed of kindly ioy and naturall delight.” The Witch's motives are purely those of revengefulness and malice. Nider's Theologus cites the opinion of “Gvilelmus” as to the maleficence prompting incubi and succubi to seek human partners: “quod verisimiliter nec succubi, nec incubi, amore concubitus, nec desiderio voluptatis, talia viris & mulieribus faciant, sed potius malignitatis studio, videlicet ut utrimque pollutant eos & eas spurcitia” (p. 626). Like the Porter's demon drink, the succubus plays havoc with a man's sexuality: it “equiuocates him in a sleepe, and giuing him the Lye, leaues him” (II.iii.39-40).

The Weird Sisters' proposed vengeance on the sailor's wife embraces another maleficient activity that witches were alleged to practice. This is the prevention of lawful sexual relations between man and wife, technically labeled ligature or, more picturesquely in English witchlore, “tying the points.” The authorities have elaborate accounts of this variously manifested process. Nider's Theologus remarks it as one of the seven principal ways in which *maleficiati* work harm, “ne vi generativa uti valeant ad feminam, vel viceversa femellae ad virum. ...” Piger later comments on the same topic:

inter sexum utrumque, matrimonii sacramento conjunctum, nonnunquam experti sumus *odia*
talia suscitari per maleficia, & similiter infrigidationes generativae potentiae, ut nec redditio, 
nec exactio debiti matrimonialis locum pro prole valerent habere.  
Theologus explains that although God does not allow the Devil to work directly on the human understanding 
or will, he does permit him to act on the bodily senses and powers, whether internal or external (p. 564). He 
describes, after “Petrus de Palude,” the various ways in which the Devil can act on the powers of imagination, 
fancy, and generation in order to prevent coition:

… Secundo modo, hominem potest inflammare ad actum illum, vel refrigerare ab actu illo, 
ahibendo occultas virtutes rerum, quas optime novit ad hoc validas. … Quarto, reprehendo 
directe vigorem membri, fructificationi accommodi, sicut & motum localem cujuscunque 
organi. Quinto, prohibendo missionem spirituum ad membra, in quibus est virtus motiva, 
quasi intercludendo vias seminis, ne ad vasa generationis descendat, vel ne ab eis recedat, vel 
ne excitetur vel emittatur, vel multis aliis modis.

The First Witch's intended course of action against the sailor and his wife economically combines the 
maleficia of the succubus with that of the devilish practitioner of ligature. As Daneau remarks, witches 
practice ligature “to thintent they may sow discorde and contencion betweene them, betweene whom ought to 
be sounde and great agreement” (sig. E.viii[8r]). Boguet observes that besides its offense to God, a further 
consequence of copulation between a succubus and a man is that 

par ce moyen la semen naturelle de l'homme se pert, d'où vient que l'amitié, qui est entre 
l'homme & la femme se conuertit le plus souuent en vne haine, qui est le plus grand malheur, 
qui pourroit arriuer au mariage.

The Weird Sisters’ proposed sowing of discord between the spouses looks forward both to Macbeth's 
murderous acts of disorder and to their ultimate issue in barrenness and estrangement between his wife and 
himself. The Witch's course of revengeful action for a trivial gesture of exclusion—the sailor's wife's refusal 
of her chestnuts—is a parodic anticipation of Macbeth's murderous wresting of the crown from the Duncan 
who had named as his heir not Macbeth but Malcolm. Here, too, the witchcraft theme coalesces with the 
themes of fruitfulness and offsprings, which are associated particularly with Duncan and Banquo, and of 
unfulfillment, sterility, and the destruction of progeny, associated with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The 
latter, in her disillusioned fretting after the attainment of her goal, voices her baffled sense of failure to 
achieve fulfillment through destruction. Her language is markedly sexual.

Nought's had, all's spent, 
Where our desire is got without content: 
'Tis safer, to be that which we destroy, 
Then by destruction dwell in doubtfull ioy.

(III.ii.4-7)

Rauber comments: “the ‘all's spent’ operates both on the levels of failure to accomplish purpose and of sexual 
impotence” (Criticism, 11 [1969-70] 62). But there is more to the passage than this; “had” includes the idea of 
satisfying carnal possession, “all's spent” suggests a useless discharge of sexual energy (literally, of semen), 
and “our desire is got without content” further implies failure to achieve sexual satisfaction. As I shall try to 
demonstrate later, “destruction”—the murder of Duncan—has earlier in the play been envisaged with growing 
emphasis as a quasi-sexual act (compare also Kott and Robinson, quoted above). Baffled desire is a recurring 
motif of Macbeth. In the powers of witches “hominem inflammare ad actum illum, vel refrigerare ab actu 
illo,” there is another parallel with the Porter's drink: “Lecherie, Sir, it prouokes and vnprouokes: it prouokes 
the desire, but it takes away the performance. Therefore much Drinke may be said to be an Equiuocator with
Lecherie: it makes him, and it marres him; it sets him on, and it takes him off; it persuades him, and dis-heartens him; makes him stand too, and not stand too. …” (II.iii.32-39).

The reference to sexual maleficia is strengthened by other sexual meanings in the Witch's lines. In Witchcraft in Old and New England (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1929) G. L. Kittredge explains “like a Rat without a tayle, / Ile doe, Ile doe, and Ile doe” merely as the Witch's intending to assume rat shape in order to slip on board the Tiger unnoticed, then to bewitch the craft and lay a spell upon the captain (p. 13). Muir cites this explanation in his note, adding that it “is doubtless correct” (New Arden ed., p. 12). But the demonologists held that demons could assume animal shapes for the purpose, inter alia, of copulation with humans as incubi or succubi. In English witch lore the domestic animal familiar is a common phenomenon. “We find that animals of all kinds were regarded as familiars: dogs, cats, ferrets, weasels, toads, rats, mice, birds, hedgehogs, hares, even wasps, moths, bees and flies” (Summers, p. 101). The power of witches to assume animal shapes is frequently asserted by the authorities—for example, by Bodin and Boguet. These metamorphoses were often undergone by incubi and succubi. Boguet writes of a witch's copulation with the Devil: “Françoise Secretain a confessé qu'il auoit esté accouplé auec elle quatre ou cinq fois, & que pour lors il estoit tantost en forme de chien, tantost en forme de chat, & tantost en forme de poule” (p. 19). The familiars addressed by the Witches in the opening scene of the play, “Gray-Malkin” and “Padock” (ll. 8, 9), may be incubi as well as attendant spirits. From the beginning, the connection between inverted sexuality and the turning upside-down of moral categories is established.

Nicolas Remy points out that whatever guise the devils assume, some defect invariably gives them away: “insolita, atque insigni aliqua nota, quae naturae immanitatem prodat, conspicuos se ostendunt.”19 Thus the rat's lack of a tail will denote its demonic origin. There may be a further significance in this deficiency. Discussing the various metamorphoses of witches, Boguet mentions cases of the appearance of wolves without tails (pp. 139, 149). Summers comments: “The sexual power of a wolf was popularly supposed to lie in his tail. … A wolf without a tail was sexually considered exceptionally unlucky and malign.”20 It is possible that Shakespeare's tailless rat is intended to suggest similar sexual malignity in the succubus-incubus exchange of roles.

Certainly the thrice-repeated verb doe has sexual meaning, besides denoting more general maleficence. Do in the sense of “copulate with” is a common Shakespearean usage, mostly in transitive constructions, to be sure: “Villain, I have done thy mother (Tit., IV.ii.76); “… what has he done?—A woman” (MM, I.ii.83-84); “Do't in your parents' eyes” (Tim., IV.i.8). But do is sometimes used intransitively in this sense: “Isbel the woman and I will do as we may” (AWW, I.iii.19-20); “You bring me to do, and then you flout me too” (Tro., IV.ii.26). The last instance, in which a woman (Cressida) uses do in its sexual sense, parallels the First Witch's employment of the verb.21

The sailor will be subjected to the Witch-succubus' unremitting coital exactions day and night for a year and a half; he is to “liue a man forbid.” While forbid doubtless has as its primary meaning “under a curse,” as Theobald glossed it, the secondary sense of “forbidden [to have conjugal relations with his wife]” seems also to be present. Muir suggests, after earlier editors, that “dwindle, peake, and pine” refers to the Witch's use of a waxen image to make the sailor waste away; more probably it alludes to the debilitating effects of the prolonged sexual assault she plans for him. The “Barke” seems to be both literal and figurative; at the figurative level its significance is plural. In general terms of supernatural maleficence it indicates the Weird Sisters' limited powers: the Witch cannot destroy either the body or the soul of the master of the Tiger, but she will give him a rough time. As critics have noted, there is here a proleptic parallel, and contrast, with Macbeth, whose bark will be lost. The particular significance of the tempest-tossed ship draws a further parallel, and implies an added contrast. When the Witch says that the sailor's “Barke cannot be lost,” she is also expressing the demonologists' contention that while witches could successfully practice ligature upon married couples, they could not undo the sacrament of marriage. This notion is stated by Hecate in Thomas Middleton's The Witch, a play that seems to have been influenced in its witch scenes by Scot's Discoverie of
Witchcraft, and very possibly by Macbeth also.

'Tis of heaven's fastening. Well may we raise jars,
Jealousies, strifes, and heart-burning disagreements,
Like a thick scurf o'er life, as did our master
Upon that patient miracle; but the work itself
Our power cannot disjoint. (22)

Similarly, the First Witch in Macbeth cannot destroy the sacramental bond between the sailor and his wife, whereas the crimes of Macbeth and his lady eventually result in an isolation of one from the other that mutely points to the self-destruction of their relationship.

Addressing the Weird Sisters, Banquo says “you should be Women, / And yet your Beards forbid me to interprete / That you are so” (I.iii.45-47). In Elizabethan-Jacobean folklore a woman's possessing a beard betokened a witch. In Macbeth this physical anomaly perhaps also emphasizes, in the light of the Weird Sisters' plans for the sailor, their demonic bisexuality.

It is interesting to note that elsewhere in Shakespeare, witchcraft is associated with sexual domination and unnatural sexual infatuation. In 1 Henry VI Talbot refers several times (and Burgundy once) to Joan La Pucelle as a witch and sorceress, and in V.iii. she confirms their descriptions by summoning her demon familiars. After she has beaten him in fight on their first encounter, Charles the Dauphin is smitten with passion for her. When Joan asserts that “Christ's Mother” has helped her to overcome him, Charles replies, “Who'er helps thee, 'tis thou that must help me. / Impatiently I burn with thy desire; / My heart and hands thou hast at once subdu'd” (I.ii.106-9). In “Who'er helps thee” there is an implied suggestion as to the real origin of Joan's power. The ghost of Hamlet's father sees Claudius' conquest of Gertrude as a kind of bewitching:

... that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wits, ...
... won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming virtuous queen.

(Ham., I.v.42-46)

Brabantio likewise claims that Othello has won Desdemona by enchantment: “For nature so preposterously to err, / Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense, / Sans witchcraft could not” (Oth., I.iii.62-64).

The parallel between the Weird Sisters' program of harassment for the sailor and Macbeth's subsequent course after he meets them has often been noted. This parallel extends to the sexual aspect of the Witches' maleficence. Their spiritual seduction of Macbeth will deprive him of true manhood. His violence against Duncan is a more extreme form of the Witches' violence against the master of the Tiger. The “terrible Dreames” (III.i.18) that afflict Macbeth after the murder of Duncan correspond to the Witch's oppression of the sailor, for nightmares were thought to be caused by the assaults of incubi and succubi.

The unnatural reversal of sexual roles characterized by the Witch's treatment of the sailor is echoed in the scenes where Lady Macbeth rouses herself and her husband to commit the act of regicide. As the critics I quoted at the beginning of this paper remark, Lady Macbeth's murderous appeal to Macbeth is couched in sexual terms. She goads him into action by scornfully questioning his manhood, which she evokes equivocally as both virility and valor. Macbeth fails to realize that it is not merely the “Iugling Fiends” who “palter with vs in a double sence” (V.viii.19, 20). The slaying of Duncan is, indeed, to be the proof of Macbeth's manliness in this particular double sense, of sexual potency and courage. At first it appears that Lady Macbeth will herself take the initiative in the crime, with Macbeth functioning as a mere agent of her murderous will (as the assassins of Banquo in turn later function on behalf of Macbeth). In her invocation of the powers of darkness
(I.v) she begs to be sexually transformed, dewomanized into an inhuman (yet somehow masculine) destroyer. She entreats the demons to usurp her body, transforming its natural life-giving powers to unnatural purposes, as the succubi-incubi exploit and abuse their victims. When she exclaims, “Come to my Womans Brests, / And take my Milke for Gall, you mutr'ring Ministers” (I.v.48-49), the invitation does not merely announce her desire to free herself from natural bonds of mutuality, tenderness, nurture, and all the other life-enhancing associations that the image of breast-feeding carries with it, although this is a major aspect of the lines. As W. Moelwyn Merchant has shown, “take my Milke for Gall” means “bewitch my milk for gall, possess it and complete the invasion of my body at its source of compassion.” But this is not the only meaning of these words. There is at the same time an evocation of a hideously perverted sexual relationship; as the succubus receives a man's seed to use it for evil purposes, as the First Witch will drain the sailor dry, so the demons, at once lovers and sucklings, are invoked by Lady Macbeth to take her milk and leave gall in its place, or perhaps, to take it away for conversion into gall. The monstrous birth produced by this unholy union is the murder, the “Nights great Businesse” (I.v.69), which is finally accomplished by Macbeth—but only after she has aroused him to it as to an act of ghastly love.

It may be asked where Shakespeare acquired his knowledge of the sexual aspects of witchcraft. There are dangers on both sides in evaluating the extent of his reading, although the unlearned Shakespeare is less heard of nowadays than formerly. For a mind as quick and an imagination as fertile as his, Scot and King James's Daemonologie provide all he needed to know; yet he may well have had access to other writers, including some of the continental authorities.

It is not only in Lady Macbeth's soliloquy that the murder of Duncan is pictured as a deed of quasi-sexual violence. Very early in the play the imagery establishes a link between sexuality and the physical violence of rebellion. The Captain evokes Macdonwald's rebellious nature in the first of the play's many images of fruitfulness and increase (here it is the spawning of evil that is expressed): Macdonwald is “Worthie to be a Rebell, for to that / The multiplying Villanies of Nature / Doe swarme vpon him” (I.i.10-12). Of this man, fecund in evil qualities, the Captain further remarks, “And Fortune on his damned Quarry smiling, / Shew'd like a Rebells Whore” (ll. 14-15). Macdonwald's paramour, the strumpet Fortune, ultimately betrays her lover. A few lines later we are told that Macbeth “(Like Valours Minion) caru'd out his passage” (l. 19). The usual gloss of Minion here is “favorite,” and this is certainly a frequent meaning of the word in Shakespeare. But it often has a sexual implication, mostly with feminine but sometimes with masculine referents: “Mars's hot minion” (of Venus: Tmp., IV.i.198); “You minion, you, are these your customers?” (to Adriana: Err., IV.iv.57); “minion, your deare lies dead” (to Desdemona: Oth., V.i.33); “this your minion, whom I know you love” (to Olivia, of “Cesario”: TN, V.i.118); “O thou minion of her pleasure!” (to the Friend: Sonnet 126, l. 9). So, too, “Valours Minion” carries sexual overtones: Macbeth disdains meretricious Fortune in his triumphant slaughtering of the rebels, for he is the chosen lover of Valor.

This linking of martial violence and savage bloodshed with sexuality and love is extended in Rosse's later description of Macbeth as “Bellona's Bridegroome” (l. 54). In his role as newly wedded mate of the war goddess, Macbeth is said to have subdued the Thane of Cawdor, another traitorous rebel (and so perhaps, like Macdonwald, another paramour of Fortune), “Curbing his lauish spirit” (I.i.57). The usual gloss for lauish here is “insolent,” but at least one other Shakespearean occurrence of the word (2H4, IV.iv.64) is in a context that supports the meaning “licentious, lascivious.” Since spirit is used to mean “semen” in the opening line of Sonnet 129 (see Partridge, s.v.), it is at least possible that Rosse's phrase includes a sexual implication: as one wedded to Bellona, Macbeth outperforms Cawdor and terminates his liaison with Fortune. Lady Macbeth's “High thee hither, / That I may powre my Spirits in thine Eare” (I.v.26-27) employs the same kind of pun: in her mood of masculine aggressiveness she sees herself as impregnating Macbeth's consciousness with her own ruthless ambition for sovereignty.

There is a similar metaphor of fertilizing through the ear in Cleopatra's “Ram thou thy fruitful tidings in mine ears, / That long time have been barren” (Ant., II.v.24-25). A submerged instance of this metaphor may be
present in Banquo's “That trusted home, / Might yet enkindle you unto the Crowne” (I.iii.120-21). In Shakespeare's Wordplay (London: Methuen, 1957), Professor M. M. Mahood support's Coleridge's interpretation of enkindle here: ‘The modern editors gloss enkindle as ‘incite,’ a figurative use of the sense ‘to set on fire’; but Coleridge thought the image was taken from the kindling, or breeding, of rabbits. Coming from Banquo, the words gain strong irony from this connotation, which fits well into the play's pattern of sterility-fertility images’ (p. 139, note 2). Further support for this reading may perhaps lie in its extending the metaphorical use of the idea of fructification through what is heard: the Weird Sisters have, in effect, poured their spirits into Macbeth's ear.

The exchanges between Macbeth and his wife that lead up to Duncan's murder, tensioned as they are by an eroticism that is sometimes submerged, sometimes overt, but continuously present, culminate in the decisive act of violence, which is envisaged as a kind of rape. In one of the play's moments of charged proleptic irony, the saintly Duncan himself provides a bridge between the opening scenes' association of violence with sexuality and that of the later scenes presenting Macbeth's transformation into a murderer. He says to his welcoming hostess, of Macbeth: “his great Loue (sharpe as his Spurre) hath holp him / To his home before vs” (I.vi.23-24). Duncan is praising both Macbeth's loyal service and his marital devotion—his love for him and for Lady Macbeth—but there is a deeper significance in his words. They not only are unconsciously ironical (since we know that Macbeth has another motive for swiftness besides the ones Duncan gives him) but they also serve to develop the thematic link between sexuality and crime. Macbeth's “black and deepe desires” (I.vi.51) include murderous impulses that are “sharpe as his Spurre.” The latter phrase is an image of sexual passion, as well as of ambition (as in “I haue no Spurre / To pricke the sides of my intent, but onely / Vaulting Ambition”: I.vii.25-27).32 Macbeth has hastened home under a stimulus that is both keenly erotic and deadly.

When Macbeth balks at the consummation of his criminal desires, his wife seeks to urge it by an appeal in terms of the same violent eroticism:

Was the hope drunke,
Wherein you drest your self? Hath it slept since?
And wakes it now to look so greene, and pale,
At what it did so freely? From this time,
Such I account thy loue. Art thou affear'd
To be the same in thine owne Act, and Valour,
As thou art in desire?

(I.vii.35-41)

Here Lady Macbeth explicitly parallels sexual action with murderous action. She appeals to Macbeth's sense of his own virility, in sexual terms. The metaphorical complexity of the passage leaves the reference of line 38 ambiguous: what is partly the contemplated murder, but partly also an intoxicated act of sexual passion, shamefacedly repented on the “morning after.” Dover Wilson quotes the Oxford editors' gloss on such (l. 39): “‘so great in promise, so poor in performance’” (New Camb. ed., p. 115). Lady Macbeth scornfully equates Macbeth's quailing from regicide with sexual nonperformance. The drunkenness and hangover images connect this speech with the Porter scene, where drunkenness is linked with lechery and with the impotence paradoxically accompanying the impetus one gives to the other. Macbeth's reply to his wife's sneer is “I dare do all that may become a man, / Who dares no more, is none.” She retorts:

What Beast was’t then
That made you breake this enterprize to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man:
And to be more then what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. Nor time, nor place
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:
They haue made themselves, and that their fitnesse now
Do's vnmake you. ...
At one level of meaning Macbeth's claim refers to his injured sense of honor and noble manhood: “is none i.e. must be superhuman or devilish, which it suits Lady M. to interpret as subhuman” (Dover Wilson, New Camb. ed., p. 115). But at the same time there is a continuing undersuggestion of sexual potency and the proper natural expression of it. Murder is like an unnatural, or nonhuman, sexual act, as Lady Macbeth's further taunt also implies. Her do it (l. 49) includes the notion of coitus, although its primary reference is to Duncan's murder; vnmake (l. 54) likewise plays upon the double meanings “undo, unnerve” and “render sexually impotent.” Building on her earlier soliloquy of erotic self-abandonment to the forces of evil, Lady Macbeth's sexual innuendoes invoking virility as a token of manliness now lead her into an appeal to her mate through horrifyingly violent images of a depraved rejection of womanly ties:

How tender 'tis to love the Babe that milkes me,  
I would, while it was smyling in my Face,  
Haue pluct my Nipple from his Boneless Gummies,  
And dasht the Braine out, had I so sworne  
As you have done to this.

Macbeth's resounding acceptance of her challenge is appropriately ironical in its language of natural increase, motherhood, and virility: “Bring forth Men-Children onely: / For thy vndaunted Mettle should compose / Nothing but Males” (ll. 72-74). His infatuation with her sees nothing strange in thus acclaiming such a tainted source of manly offspring.

All these associated themes of sexuality, witchcraft, and violence are brought together in Macbeth's final soliloquy immediately prior to the murder of Duncan. One would not wish to press unduly the air-drawn dagger as a phallic symbol, although, as I hope to show, Macbeth's regicide has overtones of an act of sexual ravishment. He himself (unconsciously, one presumes) speaks of the murder in this light after it has been discovered. Whereas Macduff announces the crime in religious terms—“Most sacrilegious Murther hath broke ope / The Lords anoyted Temple, and stole thence / The Life o'th' Building” (II.iii.72-74)—Macbeth reveals it to Duncan's sons in the language of procreation: “The Spring, the Head, the Fountaine of your Blood / Is stopt, the very Source of it is stopt” (ll. 103-4). He seeks to justify his murder of the king's chamberlains in words that suggest another act of uncontrolled sexual passion: “Th'expedition of my violent Loue / Out-run the pawser, Reason” (ll. 116-17). Most strikingly of all, Macbeth transfers his act of ravishment to the slain innocents in an image much criticized by commentators, ancient and modern: “their Daggers / Vnmannerly breech'd with gore” (ll. 121-22). One may or may not agree with Dover Wilson's adverse criticism in his note on “Vnmannerly breech'd”: “indecently clothed. With this oxymoron Macb.'s hyperbole topples to absurdity. Cf. TN III.iv.251, ‘strip your sword stark naked’” (New Camb. ed., p. 129). At any rate, the indecorous metaphor is exactly right as an involuntary indication of Macbeth's own feeling about his crime: it implicitly likens the daggers to phalluses whose nakedness is clothed, most improperly, with the royal blood. Dover Wilson appositely cites the Twelfth Night passage, for it contains an allusive quibble on sword meaning "penis." After the lines on the hallucinatory dagger, Macbeth's soliloquy in II.i continues:

Now o're the one halfe World

Nature seemes dead, and wicked Dreames abuse
The Curtain'd sleepe: Witchcraft celebrates
Pale Heccats Offrings: and wither'd Murther,
Alarum'd by his Centinell, the Wolfe,
Whose howle's his Watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquins rauishing sides, (37) towards his designe
Moues like a Ghost.

(49-56)

The death of Nature, a suspension of all natural vital and moral processes (for Nature here surely means more than merely the natural world; it includes what Banquo means by Nature in his lines at the beginning of the scene—human nature and its natural moral discriminations), is an essential preliminary to the unnatural assaults contemplated by the Weird Sisters, by Lady Macbeth, and now by Macbeth himself. The wicked dreams that “abuse / The Curtain'd sleepe” are due, inter alia, to the visitations of the nightmare, of incubi and succubi (abuse can have sexual meaning in Shakespeare: see Partridge, s.v.). Hence the transition in thought to the rites of witchcraft, which also hark back to the earlier Weird Sister scenes and their implications of demonic sexual possession. The word wither'd also recalls the Weird Sisters, as described by Banquo (I.iii.40); at the same time, this peculiarly suggestive epithet, coupled with the personification, conjures up a vision of the murderer as an elderly psychopath, a sort of Jack the Ripper. This impression is strengthened by the Tarquin allusion, which clinches the suggestions built up, not only in this soliloquy but also through the earlier structural coupling of sexuality with violence, that murder approximates to rape. Indeed, Shakespeare's presentation of Macbeth's plunge into violent criminality might have for its motto the words of Pericles: “Murther's as near to lust as flame to smoke” (Per., I.i.138). There is at any rate poetic justification for Malcolm's applying the epithet Luxurious (i.e., “lustful”: IV.iii.58) to Macbeth.

Yet while Shakespeare sees analogies between lust and its most brutal form of gratification, on the one hand, and murder, on the other, his perceptions are characteristically subtle and fresh. Although Macbeth's act of regicide originates in an atmosphere of disordered sexuality, we are not to see him as simply moving from lust to murder in a chain of violent passions (there is a contrast here with Shakespeare's portrayal of Claudius, whose regicide is motivated by adulterous sexual appetite linked with unlawful hunger for the crown). Shakespeare carefully avoids the glib moralizing of his contemporaries, whose diatribes against the evils bred by lust are cited by Dickey. In the world of Macbeth, disordered sexuality is a function of a deeper moral disorder. There is no assertion in the play of a simple connection between lust and crime, as in, for example, Marston's The Insatiate Countess, which hammers home the apothegm “Insatiate lust is sire still to murther.” Pericles's comment on the kinship of lust and murder belongs to the same uncomplex ethical framework: having observed the incestuous passion of Antiochus, he reflects that “One sin … another doth provoke” (I.i.137), lust will lead to murder, and his life is in danger unless he flees from Antioch. What we have in Macbeth's criminal career is much less straightforward: a richly suggestive evocation of the complexity of evil, of the close interdependence between seemingly opposed natural impulses. We are shown a world of human action in which the barriers between creation and destruction are less sharply defined than we habitually suppose and the borderland between what is natural and what seems unnatural is shadowy. It is a world where violence is taken for granted, alongside the piety and the respect for hierarchical social forms that are reflected in the graciousness of Duncan's court. In such a milieu of mingled barbarism and civility moral sanctions may well appear fragility based. At the same time, the barely resistible quality of Macbeth's impulse to murder is very powerfully suggested by Shakespeare's metaphorical identification of it with warped sexual passion.

The thematic and structural associations of sexuality, witchcraft, and criminal violence are used chiefly in the shaping of the action up to and shortly after the murder of Duncan. In the Porter scene that immediately follows the murder scene, sexuality is further linked with crime (and in this context its punishment): “Faith, here's an English Taylor come hither, for stealing out of a French Hose: Come in Taylor, here you may rost your Goose” (II.iii.16-18). There are a number of double-entendres here that establish the link: Taylor may be a euphemism for “penis”; stealing includes the ideas of “urinating” and, possibly, “whoring”; rost your Goose has among its meanings “treat your venereal infection.”
Some later passages continue the sexuality-witchcraft-crime associations. One of these appears in the first of the Hecate scenes, which are generally held to be spurious. Hecate chides the Weird Sisters for their trafficking with Macbeth without calling her in:

> And which is worse, all you haue done
> Hath bene but for a wayward Sonne,
> Spightfull, and wrathfull, who (as others do)
> Loues for his owne ends, not for you.

\[(III.v.10-13)\]

Dover Wilson's note on this passage states: “No relevance to Macb.; but seems to echo jealous speeches by Hecate in I.ii of Middleton's *Witch*” (New Camb. ed., p. 144). The indebtedness of the Hecate scenes in *Macbeth* to *The Witch* is a moot point; the debt may be Middleton's. The apparently meaningless reference to Macbeth as one who “Loues for his owne ends, not for you” perhaps suggests that Macbeth's relationship with the Weird Sisters is not the sort to be expected of a mortal and his succubus; more immediately, that Macbeth does not love the black arts and the Devil who commands them per se, as the *maleficiati* were believed to do, but only as means to his personal goals. If the scene is spurious, its author has at any rate perceived the sexual component in Shakespeare's presentation of both the Weird Sisters and Macbeth.42

Several of the ingredients in the Witches' cauldron have connotations of lustfulness, violence, and the unnatural termination of increase—an appropriate complement to Macbeth's wild desire to know “By the worst meanes, the worst” (III.iv.135), “Though the treasure / Of Natures Germaine, tumble altogether, / Euen till destruction sicken” (IV.i.58-60). The cauldron scene begins with references to familiars (incubi, possibly). Included in the materials for the charm are

> Liver of blaspheming Jew,
> Gall of Goate, ...
> .....Nose of Turke, and Tartars lips:
> Finger of Birth-strangled Babe,
> Ditch-deliver'd by a Drab. ...

\[(IV.i.26-27, 29-31)\]

The Weird Sisters further strengthen the mixture: “Coole it with a Baboones blood”; “Powre in Sowes blood, that hath eaten / Her nine Farrow” (II. 37, 64-65). The liver was regarded as the seat of sexual passion (this is surely too well known to need documentation); the Jew is perhaps mentioned not only because he was unchristened, like the Turk, Tartar, and birth-strangled babe, and so useful to witches, but also because of the Jews' reputation, in anti-Semitic tradition, for obscene rites with (and the murder of) Christian children. The goat, like the baboon, was believed to be a particularly lustful animal. Turks and Tartars were celebrated exponents of inordinate lustfulness and heartless cruelty. The drab exemplifies degraded sexuality; both she and the sow have killed their young (*Birth-strangled* being taken to mean “strangled at birth”) in a gross denial of natural affection. These last are the most sordid of the various instances in the play of what we might call the “destroyed progeny” theme, which so frequently characterizes the world of the Weird Sisters, Macbeth, and Lady Macbeth, and is set against the fertility theme, which likewise occurs repeatedly, as in Banquo's often-quoted speech, “This guest of summer ...” (I.vi.3 ff.).

There is a sense in which “How many children had Lady Macbeth?” is a pertinent question. For an overriding impression, built up by the various associations throughout the play between witchcraft, sexuality, and violence, is that sexuality perverted by malice, human or superhuman, issues in an ultimate, life-denying barrenness. Macbeth has, and can have, no children: Rosse's comment on Duncan's supposed murderers, Malcolm and Donalbain, is a profoundly apt description of the self-consuming sterility that is the fate of the
real ones: “Thriftlesse Ambition, that will rauen vp / Thine owne liues meanes” (II.iv.28-29). As if to stifle his own awareness of this truth, Macbeth plunges into an orgy of destruction of all who may take his stolen crown away from him. Not only Banquo but Fleance, too, must die; Malcolm must be trapped: “Diuellish Macbeth, / … hath sought to win me / Into his power” (IV.iii.117-19); and when Macduff escapes him, Macbeth resolves that “From this moment, / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand”; whereupon he orders the destruction of “His Wife, his Babes, and all vnfortunate Soules / That trace him in his Line” (IV.i.146-48, 152-53). This apparently pointless slaughter has a savage logic about it, from Macbeth's point of view: it cuts off a possible source of future retribution. It is strictly relevant to Macbeth's preoccupation with the menace posed by others' off-spring that the murderer of Macduff's son should address the boy as “you Egge? / Yong fry of Treachery?” (IV.ii.84-85; italics mine). Yet for all of Macbeth's efforts to make assurance double sure and destruction sicken, his comment upon the Weird Sisters' prophecy proves to be exactly correct: “Vpon my Head they plac'd a fruitlesse Crowne, / And put a barren Scepter in my Gripe” (III.i.61-62). By a consummate paradox it is Macduff, the “Bloody Childe” of IV.i, who finally ends Macbeth's vain hopes of succession along with his usurped rule, for “Macduff was from his Mothers womb / Vntimely ript” (V.viii.15-16). The man who gained “the Ornament of Life” (I.vii.42) through an act of life-destroying, quasi-sexual violence, loses it at the hands of an antagonist whose entrance into the world was effected through another act of sexually related violence, but in this instance a life-rendering one.

Violence is an integral aspect of nobility in the society with which the play begins and ends. Properly channeled and directed, by cohesive social forces involving service and selfless courage, it preserves order, upholds just rule, and is a power for good. When released by the individual with the headlong force of overmastering sexual passion and at the urging of evil forces from within and without, violence brings destruction, social disintegration, and personal damnation. Sonnet 129, to which I have already alluded, is surely remarkably apt as an evocation of Macbeth's homicidal career, which, like lust, Is perjur'd, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame, Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust; Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight; Past reason hunted, and no sooner had, Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait, On purpose laid to make the taker mad— Mad in pursuit, and in possession so; Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme; A bliss in proof, and prov'd, a very woe; Before, a joy propos'd; behind, a dream.

(3-12)

The one jarring phrase here is “A bliss in proof”—Macbeth has no joy in his crimes, and it is part of his tragedy that he realizes this before, while, and after he commits them. That aside, it is fair to say that Macbeth gains a major part of its power through its continued suggestion that “Murther's as near to lust as flame to smoke.”

Notes

1. John B. Harcourt, “‘I Pray You, Remember the Porter,’” *SQ* [Shakespeare Quarterly], 12 (Autumn 1961), 397. Cf. also Eric Partridge: “Macbeth is the ‘purest’ of the Tragedies, and, except for the Porter Scene, pure by any criterion” (Shakespeare's Bawdy, rev. and enl. ed. [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969], p. 46). I realize that these comments refer principally to a felt absence of bawdry, but their implication is that allusions to sexual matters in general are few.

was accepted for publication. I have seen Roger L. Cox's *Between Earth and Heaven: Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and the Meaning of Christian Tragedy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969). In his chapter on *Macbeth*, Cox draws attention to various hitherto unnoticed sexual meanings in the play. A number of these coincide with my own readings, and I am reassured to find an independent confirmation of them. Cox does not, however, link sexuality in *Macbeth* with witchcraft and violence, as I seek to do; he is, rather, concerned to make biblical connections.


7. Quoted from the note on I.iii.9 in the New Variorum *Macbeth*, ed. H. H. Furness (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1873), p. 32. None of the commentators remarks on the significance of chestnuts in this context, though the New Variorum edition quotes Dyce's friend's speculation that *rump-fed* may mean “nut-fed,” citing Kilian's Dictionary for *Rompe* meaning “empty nut” (ibid.). I have nothing in the way of explanation to offer, but there may well be some special point in the reference to chestnuts.


9. As, for instance, in “The poor Transylvanian is dead that lay with the little baggage” (*Per.*, IV.ii.21-22); “The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to't / With a more riotous appetite” (*Lr.*, IV.vi.122-23). *Ronyon* is an obscure word. The only *OED* citations of it are the two Shakespearean instances and the form *Runnyon*, from a 1655 imitation of Chaucer, where it means “penis.” In Chaucer *ronyon/ronyan* may have ribald connotations: see the note on Seint Ronyan, *CT*, VI, 310, and the references there given, in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 728.


13. *Mallevs Maleficarvm* …, I (Lyons, 1615), Pars Prima, Quaestio vi, 70. Contractions are expanded in this quotation and in all subsequent ones from older writers, with other slight modernizing. Accounts of incubi and succubi, their sexual relations with witches and other humans, their motives in the practice, and their methods of obtaining and using human semen appear in the following representative writers on witchcraft, besides those already mentioned: St. Bonaventura, *Sententiarium*, Liber II, d.viii, Pars Prima, a. 3, q. 1 (quoted by Montague Summers in *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* [London: Kegan Paul, 1926], n. 34, p. 105); Ulrich Molitor, *Tractatus de Lamiis et Pythonicis* [1489] (Paris, 1561); Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London, 1584); Jean

14. Sinistrari observes that the Devil has sexual relations not only with witches but also with ordinary men and women: “Prout autem apud diversos Auctores legitur, et pluribus experimentis comprobatur, duplici modo Daemon hominibus carnaliter copulatur: uno modo quo Maleficis et Sagis jungitur, alio modo quo aliis hominibus minime maleficis miscetur.” (Lisieux, 1879 ed., p. 21). See also Section 25, p. 30.


17. Pp. 567-68. Discussions of ligature also appear in *Malleus*, Molitor, Lambert Daneau (*A Dialogue of Witches* … [London, 1575]). Scot, James VI, Boguet, Binsfeld, Guazzo, Cooper, and Del-Rio. Guazzo and Del-Rio both list as witches’ means of achieving ligature the enforced separation of spouses and the drying up of the husband’s semen. The First Witch plans to practice both these evils.


19. Nicolai Remigii, … *Daemonolatreiae libri tres* … (Lyons, 1595), Liber 1, Cap. vii, p. 77.


21. See further Partridge, *Shakespeare’s Bawdy*, p. 95. In *Our Naked Frailties: Sensational Art and Meaning in “Macbeth”* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971), which I read after having completed this article, Paul A. Jorgensen points out (without illustration) the bawdy sense of *doe* (p. 120).


Swithold footed thrice the ’old;  
He met the nightmare and her ninefold;  
……And aroint thee, witch, aroint thee!

In Middleton’s *The Witch* there are references to incubus and succubus activities by Hecate and the witch Stadlin, and Hecate’s son Firestone seeks permission “to ramble abroad tonight with the Nightmare, for I have a great mind to overlay a fat parson’s daughter” (I.ii.90-92: ed. cit., V, 371). Italics mine. See also Robbins, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*, s.v. Nightmare.

undertones: Lady Macbeth offers herself to erotic invasion by her demonic lovers; she sees the deed of darkness as an act of sexual fulfillment (p. 268). Dover Wilson had earlier remarked that Lady Macbeth is “invoking the Powers of Hell to take possession of her body, to suck her breasts as demons sucked those of witches” (Intro., New Camb. ed., pp. lvi-ivii).

27. “‘His Fiend-Like Queen,’” ShS, 19 (1966), 76.

28. Daneau, discussing the various means by which “Sorcerers can cast their poysons” (Ch. III), remarks, “I haue seene them, who with onely laying their handes vpon a nurses breasts, haue drawne foorth all the milke, and dryed them vp” (A Dialogue of Witches, sig. E.iii.).


30. Hanmer's emendation, quarrel, is practically certain.

31. Kaula (ShakS, 2 [1966], 118), remarking that Shakespeare “provides several indications that Iago's hatred for Othello is in fact an inverted love and his campaign against him a kind of sadistic sexual assault,” cites as one of these, “I'll pour this pestilence into his ear” (II.iii.345). In a note on the latter passage Kaula states: “That Iago's pouring of poison in Othello's ear represents a kind of impregnation is borne out by the symbolic identification of poison with semen, an identification recognized not only by the modern psychoanalyst … but also by Shakespeare's contemporary, Dr. Jorden.” Kaula quotes in this connection from Jorden's Discourse of the Mother. In Iago's metaphor we have a blend of the actual poisoning through the ear, perpetrated on King Hamlet by Claudius, and the fertilization images cited in this paper.

32. Vaulting can likewise be a sexual metaphor: cf. e.g., “vaulting variable ramps” (Cym., I.vi.133).

33. Rowe's emendation, do, is necessary here for the antithesis; the assertion as it stands is meaningless.

34. The Shakespearean association of depraved sexuality with beasts is too common to need much illustration, but cf., e.g., “that incestuous, that adulterate beast” (Ham., I.v.42); “O you beast! … Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice?” (MM, III.i.137,139); “the beast with two backs” (Oth., I.i.118).

35. Cf. again the Porter on drink and lechery: “it makes him, and it marres him” (II.iii.36: italics mine).

36. Cf. Partridge, p. 196, s.v. sword. Lady Macbeth's Knife (I.v.53) is likewise phallic, as Wilbur Sanders points out: “… she will do the deed of darkness, in her sexually inverted state, with her ‘keene Knife’, under the ‘Blanket of the darke’; and there is to be no interfering moralistic heaven to bring about coitus interruptus—she will have her fulfilment” (p. 268).

37. Pope's emendation, strides, is as certain as these things can be: sides is nonsense.

38. In Appendix D of his New Arden edition, Muir notes various parallels between Mac. and Luc. and comments: “These parallels may possibly be explained by Shakespeare's belief that 'murder's akin to lust as fire to smoke [sic]'” (p. 195). On the prevalence of this idea in Renaissance literature see Franklin M. Dickey, Not Wisely but Too Well: Shakespeare's Love Tragedies (1957; rpt. San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1966), pp. 40 ff.


40. My colleague R. P. Laidlaw has suggested that there may be further ramifications of the succubus-incubus-violence association in Duncan's murder and related events. He writes: “Developing from your interpretation of ‘dreyne him drie as Hay’ (I.iii.18) it seems possible to see significance in Lady Macbeth offering drink to the attendants, turning them into ‘spungie Officers’ (I.vii.71), since there is a strong emphasis on the draining of Duncan's blood—‘who would have thought the olde man to haue had so much blood in him’ (V.i.44-45)—and upon drought imagery after the discovery of the murder—‘the Wine of Life is drawne, and the meere Lees / Is left this Vault, to brag of’ (II.iii.100-101) and ‘The Spring, the Head, the Fountaine of your Blood / Is stopt’ (103-4). The link between drinking wine and shedding blood is made explicit in the first of these two latter quotations. If the attendants can be seen as sham succubi (and at the least they share Duncan's bed) as well as sham murderers, Macbeth's act of killing them takes on a double significance, since he is not
only severing himself from his guilt but also from the powers which led him on. Your own interpretation of the bloody daggers in phallic terms and a further link with the Witch's speech (‘Sleepe shall neyther Night nor Day / Hang vpon his Pent-house Lid’: I.iii.19-20), ‘Sleep no more: / Macbeth does murther Sleepe’ (II.ii.35-36), may suggest that Macbeth himself takes on the dual role.”

41. See further Harcourt, SQ, 12 (Autumn 1961), 398-99 and the references there given. Steal and stale were homophonic in Shakespeare's English (see Helge Kökeritz, Shakespeare's Pronunciation [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1953], pp. 148, 175, 198); stale (v.) meant “urinate” but possibly also “whore”: Shakespeare certainly uses the noun stale to mean “harlot, trollop” (see Partridge, s.v.). On tailor meaning “penis” see also Hilda M. Hulme, Explorations in Shakespeare's Language (London: Longmans, 1962), pp. 99 ff.

42. Cf. Merchant: “… Hecate broods over this play, whatever the status of the ‘interpolated scenes’” (ShS, 19 [1966], 81).

43. The Globe editors' emendation, germens, and the deletion of the comma are obviously correct (the Q. and the F. texts of Lr., III.ii.8 have Germaines and germaines respectively).

44. Miss Mahood comments: “Firstlings can mean ‘firstborn young’ as well as ‘the first results of anything, or first-fruits.’ Macbeth has no children but acts of violence against the children of others” (Shakespeare's Wordplay, p. 135). Paul A. Jorgensen also remarks on the sterility of the relationship between Macbeth and his wife (Our Naked Frailties, pp. 153-54).

**Criticism: Themes: Franco Ferrucci (essay date 1980)**


[In the following excerpt, Ferrucci focuses on Act V, scenes i and ii—which involve Macduff, his family, and Malcolm—as they illustrate key elements essential to the thematic structure of Macbeth. The critic argues that in this drama of violent contradiction, Macduff shows himself to be a dissimulator rather than a benevolent foil to Macbeth's evil.]

Fair is foul, and foul is fair.

— i, i, 11

In the course of his lengthy conclave with the witches (Macbeth, iv, i), Macbeth learns that Macduff had fled to England after the murder of Duncan, leaving his castle unguarded, his wife and children defenseless. Macbeth resolves to seize the opportunity to annihilate “His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line” (ll. 151-152). In the following scene, Macduff's cousin Ross, after trying in vain to calm Lady Macduff's alarm at the news of her husband's flight, leaves her alone with her small son. The brief dialogue between the mother and child is cut short by the arrival of the murderers, who swiftly discharge Macbeth's order to do away with them.

This entire episode is dominated by images of birds and flight. In his use of the verb “to fly,” with its secondary meaning “to flee,” Shakespeare conveys all he intends to suggest. Used initially in the former sense, gradually the word begins to imply the latter. How can Macduff flee the land, his wife protests, leaving us here defenseless?

He wants the natural touch. For the poor wren,
The most diminutive of birds, will fight,
Her young ones in her nest, against the owl.
Unlike the male bird, Macduff has fled the nest, and it is as if he were dead to his loved ones. “Your father's
dead,” the mother says to the child after Ross has gone. “And what will you do now? / How will you live?”
And the son echoes the New Testament parable: “As birds do, mother. … With what I get.” Thinking of the
pitfalls, of the lime and the net, the mother exclaims: “Poor bird!” (iv, ii, 31-34).

At the opening of the scene, Lady Macduff is certain that her husband's flight was irrational (“His flight was
madness”) and that he has become a traitor as a result of fear.

When our actions do not,
Our fears do make us traitors.

The words express the contempt reserved for the rash and the cowardly. Ross's unexpected reply is pregnant
with meaning:

Whether it was his wisdom or his fear.

At this juncture, Lady Macduff's amazement is justified. What sort of wisdom or sagacity can possibly
underlie Macduff's action? If such there be, she is unable to conceive of it; not even birds leave their nests
unprotected. Her attack is so forceful, so explicit, that Ross is again compelled to come to his friend's defense,
and in so doing leaves her in no doubt about her plight.

This episode has long been misinterpreted, mainly because it has been considered of secondary significance to
Macbeth's great tragedy, whereas in fact it is one of the drama's focal points and decisive for an understanding
of the work as a whole.

The essence of Ross's defense of Macduff is in the lines:

He is noble, wise, judicious, and best knows
The fits o' th' season.

But having gone thus far, Ross realizes that he cannot prove what he asserts without making a complete
revelation, which is proscribed, and adds: “I dare not speak much further.” And why not speak? This is not the
time to conceal the truth. Ross then makes a slight concession to Lady Macduff's perplexity by adding:

But cruel are the times, when we are traitors
And do not know ourselves.

The word “traitors” appears for the second time, here in a context fraught with ambiguity and with at least a
partial admission: Macduff may be a traitor, and Ross too perhaps, either unwittingly or feigning lack of
awareness. The latter seems more likely; indeed, the haste with which he leaves is, at the very least, suspect:

Shall not be long but I'll be here again.

Then, with sinister prescience and foreboding, he declares:
Things at the worst will cease, or else climb upward
To what they were before.

[iii, 16-25]

No one takes any action to protect the doomed victims, nor does anyone remain with them. Their fate has been decided; Lady Macduff realizes this at the end of Ross's discourse. If, in fact, Macduff was "judicious," his heedless flight, leaving his castle and family unguarded, would have been unthinkable. "Fathered he is, and yet he's fatherless," she says of her son, then bluntly says to him: "Your father's dead. / And what will you do now?" He will live "As the birds do," he replies, afterward declaring that his father is not dead. The mother insists that he is, even though she knows he is not. Yet there is something more she wants to say, and sensing it the child inquires: "Was my father a traitor, mother?" (iii, 1, 31-44).

Again the word appears—the third time spoken without hesitation. "That he was," replies the mother. "What is a traitor?" the boy wants to know. One who swears an oath and fails to keep it, and so must be hanged. And who hangs him? "Honest men." The son declares, "Then the liars and swearers are fools, for there are liars and swearers enow to beat the honest men and hang up them" (iii, 2, 45-58).

These words of the "poor monkey," as the mother fondly calls him, contain perhaps the most profound meaning of the tragedy of Macbeth, and it is not by chance that they are entrusted to the voice of innocence, for it is the innocent who judge the world for what it is: the theater of an impracticable justice and of the inevitable triumph of evil. When a messenger comes to warn them of the approaching murderers, the mother cries:

I have done no harm. But I remember now
I am in this earthly world, where to do harm
Is often laudable, to do good sometime
Accounted dangerous folly. Why then, alas,
Do I put up that womanly defense,
To say I have done no harm?

[iii, 2, 73-79]

Her words, though more impassioned, confirm those of the child. When the first murderer enters, the scene becomes paradoxical. "Young fry of treachery!" the murderer insults the boy even as he stabs him, and, ironically, he is right. Be that as it may, Macduff's real treason, the betrayal of his family, will go unpunished, as his wife intuitively knows. No one will brand it as treason.

This scene (iii, 2) and the following one, which presents the dialogue-confrontation between Macduff and Malcolm, are, in my opinion, two monumentally important passages in the autobiography of the work, comparable to no other scene in the Shakespearean universe but that of Hamlet's advice to the actors. In these few pages of Macbeth, the entire tragic edifice is shaken and all but shattered. The blow is violent and difficult to disguise, but Shakespeare succeeds in controlling its effects. It is my intention to show why and how he does this. If we recall first certain basic historical facts concerning the tragedy of Macbeth, they will help us to understand what takes place on the creative level.

In the summer of 1606, King Christian of Denmark paid a royal visit to England, and Shakespeare was commissioned by King James to write a tragedy in honor of the occasion. Written in haste, Macbeth betrays signs of its immediate purpose. First, the play is short: the royal guests must not be wearied, and the king's distaste for lengthy dramas disregarded. Second, the theme of darkness, rich in symbolic resonances, is amply developed; a gloomy setting is more easily produced at court than would have been feasible in a daylight
performance at the Globe. Furthermore, several allusions link the spectators to the action of the drama: Duncan's visit to Macbeth's castle contrasts with Christian's reception by James; the English king's forebears (beginning with Banquo, who, in Holinshed's *Chronicles* is an indefensible traitor) are all portrayed as patently honorable men.

The drama may be an apology for the good king and his right to reign and an emphatic condemnation of the usurpation of power. Duncan represents the good king; he speaks exactly as a good king ought to speak, according to the *Basilikon Doron*, a tract on the nature of royal authority written by King James. The king had earlier concerned himself with the subject of witchcraft in a work entitled *Demonology*, and it is clear that at the time he believed in the malign influence of witches. By the year 1606, he may no longer have held these beliefs, as is suggested by H. N. Paul, but he did not make his views known. We understand the significance of the witches in Macbeth—they pose the problem and incite the protagonist to action; but what was Shakespeare's purpose in giving them such prominence in a tragedy designed primarily to be performed before the king and his court?

The answer is somewhat ambiguous. It seems to me that *Macbeth* is assailed by contrasting exigencies which at times intersect with violence, and only the extraordinary poetic power, perhaps unmatched in the whole of the Shakespearean theater, unites them. Contradictions and improbabilities are dissolved by a mystical force, and it requires a cold, objective effort on the part of the reader to bring them to light. Almost every phrase is an allusion, every verse an epigraph; as the long years of a reign are reduced to a maelstrom of bloody days and sleepless nights, the kind of argumentation that characterizes Hamlet's long delay becomes in *Macbeth* the expression of a frenzy of action that consumes itself. A spasmodic haste replaces the brooding idleness. Yet no sooner do we pause to reflect, as in our opening comments on the scene at Macduff's castle, than questions arise.

*Macbeth* is rich in references to contemporary events. Among the most important are the thwarted Gunpowder Plot, which occurred only a few months prior to the drafting of the play; the trial of the Jesuits who supported the “Machiavellian” doctrine of equivocation; the hurricane of 1606; and the witch trials. As any thoughtful reader knows, an aesthetic appreciation of a work like *Macbeth* is not dependent on this sort of information, but the awareness of being faced with a complex system does induce a certain desire for knowledge.

The laudatory allusions to King James are, for the most part, not hard to recognize; those to the traitors who conspired in the Gunpowder Plot are no less obvious. And the elements of the play designed to gratify the royal need for adulation show that Shakespeare, as a thorough professional, did not shirk an obligatory task. Clearly, Malcolm and Duncan are brought in as proof of the legitimacy of the Scottish king's succession to the English throne, but we are left in a quandary as to the witches. The subject unquestionably held a fascination for James. Shakespeare, following Holinshed, accomplished two aims with one stroke: he satisfied the emotional needs of the sovereign while giving him an opportunity to condemn the protagonist. The fact remains, however, that James had believed in the power of witches, as evidenced by his writings, so the supernatural aspect of the play would appear to be a rather dubious medium of felicitation for his changed attitude. Or does the author wish to convey something other than this, something that comes to him only in flashes of a disquieting intuition?

This supposition is magnified when one turns to another episode: the sleep-walking scene that precedes Lady Macbeth's death (v, i). This is the climax of the prolonged obsession with insomnia that torments the protagonists. As has frequently been remarked, sleep, like food, has a fundamentally symbolic quality in *Macbeth*: to sleep and eat regularly and well is to be in harmony with nature and oneself. The banquet interrupted by the appearance of Banquo's ghost—the uneaten repast—portends a sleepless night. In the course of the play a curious exchange of roles is effected. In the beginning it is Macbeth who appears to be plagued by insomnia; after the murder of Duncan he hears a voice cry, “Sleep no more!” and later, after Banquo's murder and the appearance of his ghost, has to be led away by Lady Macbeth to seek tranquillity in
repose. But the malady originally manifested in Macbeth is transmitted to his wife, and it is she who is stricken by an extreme and irremediable form of ravaged sleep. Various interpretations have been offered for this unexpected transformation in so cold and obdurate a woman. Nothing in the play has prepared us for her final breakdown, which might rather have been expected of her husband, who instead bears up and retains his lucidity even in the face of catastrophe.

The most ingenious of the explanations, advanced by Sigmund Freud among others, is of a critical-aesthetic nature, and suggests that Shakespeare strove for metaphorical rather than psychological consistency, sometimes shifting a quality from one character to another without great regard for verisimilitude. But such an explanation is hardly convincing here, and becomes even less so when one simple but well-documented fact is considered: King James himself suffered from insomnia and was very much interested in the phenomenon of somnambulism, in which he saw an element of magic that fascinated him. A knowledge of these traits clarifies the picture: once again Macbeth adumbrates a characteristic of the king, but at the point of carrying the similarity to its logical conclusion the author's discretion gains the upper hand. Let us not go too far, he seems to imply; if there must be insomnia, attribute it to Lady Macbeth rather than risk having the sovereign see himself in the protagonist. If true, this interpretation only serves to confirm the fact that Shakespeare was quite conscious of his allusions to James—allusions that could scarcely be termed benign by the reader, the cloak of ambiguous adulation notwithstanding.

All this would be of only relative importance were it not for the fact that it throws a new light on the intentions, and still more on the significance, of the tragedy. In this context it is useful to recall the climate in which the works belonging to the “great period”—from *Hamlet* to *Timon of Athens*—were born. According to Theodore Spencer, *Hamlet* represents a decisive development as far as the representation of human nature is concerned: the harmonious vision that had inspired the previous works is fractured, and there unfolds an irrevocable conflict that is rooted in the universe itself. In the progression to a more mature phase, *Hamlet* occupies a place of paramount importance, and I should like to add a few considerations to those already advanced by the many perceptive interpreters of this major drama.

Hamlet is the first Shakespearean tragic hero to doubt the legitimacy of his own role. His destiny is that of witnessing. Having witnessed his father's glorious reign, he is then witness to the corrupt rule of the fratricidal Claudius when he assumes the royal prerogatives. In the atmosphere of regal pomp, Hamlet affects the disquieting posture of the fool, without ceasing to be the court intellectual, poet, and subtle rhetorician, whose imaginative faculty surpasses that of his philosopher friend Horatio. Hamlet alone talks with his father's ghost; he alone is in contact with a world whose truths are revealed in hallucinations and lightning flashes, a world of unconscious certitudes prefigured in the form and raiment of the murdered king. Hamlet is the court artist. And the other artists are the itinerant players he will use to unmask Claudius. It is Hamlet's destiny to be present at the collapse of one dynasty and the beginning of a new order which he dimly senses is to be perfidious, and in order to expose it as such he needs proof. His reproaches to his mother are addressed to the very concept of the royal crown: Are you a whore, then, giving yourself to everyone, being passed from hand to hand?

Is it worth recalling that at the time of the writing of the great tragedies power was being transferred from the Tudors to the Stuarts, from Elizabeth to James. The fascination exercised upon her subjects by Elizabeth need not be emphasized. One has only to remark that the flourishing exercised upon her subjects by Elizabeth need not be emphasized. One has only to remark that the flourishing exerted upon the theater during that period would not have been possible without the sense of stability, security, and absolute legitimacy that her long reign had communicated to her subjects, to noblemen and artists alike. It cannot be mere chance that immediately after her death (and even immediately before, as can be seen in certain intimations in *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*), Shakespeare's work reflects a kind of inner agitation. By means of theatrical schemes already tested, his poetic force ends in endowing the problems that afflicted England during those years with a cosmic density. The unaccustomed insecurity, the sense of being present at the end of a halcyon era, the cumulative foreboding rumbling through a kingdom that felt itself divested of genuine protection—all these are deeply etched in the
pages of *Hamlet, Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, the great dramas of power overthrown. Nature too becomes the stage of a universal drama. An apocalyptic air, as of the imminent end of the world, must have had political as well as personal motivations. *Timon of Athens* marks the point of perhaps the greatest pessimism in the entire Shakespeare oeuvre; the nature of power emerges in all its horror.

By the year 1606, the immediate repercussions to the succession lie in the past. The general discontent, however, has deepened, and with it a sense of having entered upon a period of irreparable decadence (one need only think of the evolution of a man like John Donne toward an increasingly desolate vision of life). In Shakespeare, too, beginning with *Hamlet*, one notes a pervasive climate of nostalgia: the land is now “a sterile promontory,” the kingdom “an unweeded garden.” Court festivals have deteriorated to drunken revels, and ceremonial to mere sham. The wisdom of Polonius is banal pedantry; Claudius and the Queen are an imitation of a happily married couple; and Laertes is an impersonation of spirited, valorous youth. In *Hamlet’s* compulsion to unmask the lie, Ophelia, incapable of pretense, is reduced by him to genuine madness. From this point on, in Shakespeare's tragedies madness becomes the destiny of those who, like Ophelia and Lear, see things for what they are. Even *Hamlet* requires a fiction to “catch the conscience of the King,” and at the close of the tragedy, begs Horatio to “draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story.”

It is Horatio who takes the situation in hand when Fortinbras arrives; Horatio announces that he will recount “How these things came about.” The tragedy of *Hamlet* seems about to begin again: “call the noblest to the audience,” cries Fortinbras; “Bear *Hamlet*, like a soldier, to the stage.” The *audience* includes the spectators as well, and the *stage* is also that of the theater. Among so many fictions, at least art survives.

But of what will this story speak?

Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc’d cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall’n on th’ inventors’ heads.

[v, ii, 384-388]

We are now in the realm of the “poor player” later hypothesized by *Macbeth*; we are in the poetics proclaimed by the witches in the opening scene of *Macbeth*: “Fair is foul and foul is fair.” Through his perception of the incomprehensible tragedy of life, *Hamlet* is the first of Shakespeare’s characters to challenge tragedy as a literary genre nourished by classical moral and intellectual lucidity. There begins a chapter of Shakespeare’s work that reflects hopeless confusion and that will reach its climax in that “comedy of the grotesque” which will be *King Lear*. What G. Wilson Knight says of *King Lear* can be generalized to apply to *Hamlet, Macbeth*, and *Othello* as well: “The tragedy is most poignant in that it is purposeless, unreasonable. … It faces the very absence of tragic purpose.” (*The Wheel of Fire*, pp. 174-175).

When Shakespeare goes to the royal court to present *Macbeth*, he finds himself in a situation not unlike that of *Hamlet* in the third act: now Shakespeare’s will be the play “to catch the conscience of the King.” But Shakespeare will have to be even more adroit than *Hamlet*; there must be no mistake; one false step will mean his ruin. Once again, necessity proves to be the mother of invention—even of genius. *Macbeth* emerges as a masterpiece of contradictory meanings unified by a violence that leaves the spectator no time to catch his breath. The expedients contrived to gratify the sovereign are undeniably obvious yet at the same time subtly venomous. Let us take the murdered King Duncan as one example. If he is meant to represent the “good king” (conforming to James’s *Basilikon Doron*), his brief appearances, sketched in somewhat idyllic tints, seem almost a travesty in the atmosphere of the drama's violence. Rather than good, Duncan seems merely inept, not even a warrior king, since his battles are all won for him by others.
There is also the whole question of the legitimacy of power. Banquo emerges as somewhat better than his prototype in Holinshed, and it is quite clear why: he is the founder of the house that has put James on the throne. But quite apart from the fact that this Scottish king cannot possibly represent a legitimate English king to Shakespeare's contemporaries, there remains the fundamental question: How is this legitimacy to be proved? For instance, do those who rebel against Macbeth after he becomes king transgress the laws of loyalty? It is no easy matter to determine where treason begins and ends. Whereas Hamlet is haunted by a nightmare of legitimacy violated, Macbeth is animated by an unbridled will to violate a recognized hereditary right. If both are guided by specters and visions, it is because their reasoning is lost in a labyrinth of hypotheses. The will to act that animated both heroes is transmuted into ghosts and a chorus of witches that voice the precepts of the dramas.

This grotesque objectification is crucial. It seems clear to Hamlet that the principles of tragedy are rooted in the irrational, and this is why he, the sophistic intellectual and lover of hair-splitting wordplay, equivocates throughout the entire development of the work. Indeed, he has no great desire to enter into a drama as inconclusive as that enjoined by a ghost avid for revenge. This Hamlet who, through Shakespeare, had read Montaigne and can always find a reason for deferring the act of vengeance, only resolves to act after realizing that he is caught in a trap and may die before he has consummated what he wishes.

Macbeth also finds himself constrained to enter into a hopeless drama. The difference is that whereas any lack of logic is contrary to Hamlet's discriminating sensibility, the distraction and chaos of Macbeth's tragedy are largely of his own making. The famous monologue after Lady Macbeth's death is the quintessence of the play's central theme: once good and evil, fair and foul, have been conjoined, the direction of the action consigned to the witches, and Macbeth made the royal protagonist, what can be expected if not a chaotic, clamorous spectacle? It is this that Shakespeare presents to his audience: a drama “signifying nothing,” in which all in turn lament its absurdity. “Confusion now hath made his masterpiece,” says Macduff, on discovering Duncan's murder. And it is not only a question of moral chaos, of an ethical harmony destroyed, but of an aesthetic principle violated. We are immersed in the brew conjured by the witches according to their infernal recipe in Act iv. This too is an *ars poetica*, a jumble of everything thrown together in a weird, repellent mixture in which nothing relates to anything else.

The two protagonists of *Macbeth* anxiously set about trying to activate their drama from the outset. In vain does Lady Macbeth give her husband a lesson in dissimulation; in vain does she prescribe the very expression of his face. Macbeth is fated to betray himself, for, having entered upon the drama of life as actor-king, he wants to live it with passion, and therein lie the seeds of his failure. He stumbles onto the stage like a clown, assuming “borrowed robes,” “a fruitless crown,” “a barren sceptre.” The dialogue between the husband and wife while they prepare to execute their crime has the timbre of actors about to make an entrance on the stage. The wife even speaks of changing her sex—an oblique allusion to women's roles being played by boys in the Elizabethan theater.

The metaphor of the actor, which runs through all of Shakespeare's work, finds in the king (or aspiring king) its most apt and cogent use, for there was a general acceptance of the analogy between the two vocations. Macbeth's maladroit haste in donning the royal robes is a symptom of his unfitness to interpret the role of the protagonist. Like a second-rate actor, he is incapable of emerging from his assigned role (an insight that will also be found in Diderot's *Paradoxe du comédien*). Once embarked upon his bloody course, he cannot stop himself; the action of interpreting (to act means both to take action and to play) possesses him, giving him no respite. He commits murder almost blindly; he is the actor who cannot relinquish his persona. When, during her raving, Lady Macbeth tries to wipe out the blood spot on her hand, it is as if it were some sort of stage makeup resistant to removal; what had once been action and memory now becomes passion and remorse.

Furthermore, the time is “out of joint,” for everything happens at the wrong time in the famous drama “signifying nothing”: cues are picked up too early or too late; the actors' timing is off. In Lady Macbeth's
words:

Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant.

[i, v, 56-58]

And Macbeth himself, before the murder of Duncan, says:

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If th' assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease, success: that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all—here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come.

[i, vii, 1-7]

These lines show the two protagonists' chimerical sense of time, immured as they are in a visionary notion of its essence. In fact they are in search of absolute time, which can be attained only through hallucination, through a leap into a present beyond the future. The actual present coincides with the imbalance of the reeling action: when Macbeth asks, “What is the night?” his wife replies, “Almost at odds with the morning, which is which” (iii, iv, 126-127). And when the present is past it becomes irreparable; it is neither rectified nor made acceptable. The action becomes part of the past, but not of incontrovertible time. In the monologue after his wife's death, Macbeth describes life as divided into yesterdays and tomorrows, which transform the recurrent present into a chaos, “full of sound and fury.” This realization produces another visionary leap beyond the future: if his wife had died hereafter, “There would have been a time for such a word.” This time can be nothing less than unattainable time, beyond choice, beyond remorse. The mechanism of haste, in which this perception is expressed, is that of the guilty conscience.

Through reflection on the problem of power, nature itself is brought into question. Macbeth's speech to the murderers who are to kill Banquo is the focal point of this reinterpretation of man.

FIRST Murtherer:

We are men, my liege.

MACBETH:

Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men,

As hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs,

Shoughs, warerugs and demi-wolves, are clipt

All by the name of dogs. The valued file

Distinguishes the swift, the slow, the subtle,

The housekeeper, the hunter, every one

According to the gift which bounteous nature

I state that all men, and especially princes, who are placed at a greater height, are reputed for certain qualities which bring them either praise or blame. Thus one is considered liberal, another *misero* or miserly … ; one a free giver, another rapacious; one cruel, another merciful; one a breaker of his word, another trustworthy; one effeminate and pusillanimous, another fierce and high-spirited; one humane, another haughty; one lascivious, another chaste; one frank, another astute; one hard, another easy; one serious, another frivolous; one religious, another an unbeliever, and so on.

The philosophical kernel of both the above passages lies in the notion of man as an empty vessel that must be filled with qualifying attributes—attributes which all relate to an *action*. Man is nothing until he acts; indeed, only action renders definition possible. Action is the vital manifestation that defines a man while at the same time imprisoning him in a role, which may engender a metaphysical anxiety, as in the case of Hamlet, for whom the great enterprises he dreams of “lose the name of action.” Machiavelli’s prince too is defined through his action, which is at the same time *being* and *seeming*, taking action and playing a role; which shows that *Macbeth* is deeply indebted to the Machiavellian philosophy of power.

Looking back, we can see in Shakespeare’s plays the nature of the progression in this conception of power. The description of the kingdom as a well-cultivated garden, which is found in *Richard II*, represents a stage of optimism at which political harmony is adduced as a possible “imitation” of natural harmony; therefore the apologue is related as truth and accepted as such by the writer and the character. But this is certainly not true of the crisis in *Hamlet*. Ulysses’ famous speech in *Troilus and Cressida*” (i, iii, 75ff.), frequently cited by critics as exemplifying Shakespeare’s creed, is raddled with falseness and deceit; and it is not without reason that the author assigns it to Ulysses, the proverbial liar. The sun king at the center of the universe, a Ptolemaic vision, cannot appear to be simply naïve in Shakespeare’s eyes. At the moment, the harmony and legitimacy of power are defensible only through the medium of the *well-spoken lie*, through a persuasive rhetoric that is inspired by the desecration of the farcical Trojan War, in which it seems strange that the only serious element should be Ulysses’ discourse. The great tragedies take another forward step: power is viewed as *substantial illegitimacy* that is self-perpetuating, and as *apparent legitimacy* that is redeemed by success and guaranteed by the form in which it is presented to the world. When Lady Macbeth says to her husband, “look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent underneath ’t,” she is trying to give him a lesson both in acting and in imitating nature, as if nature were to act its own innocence. Here the evil within man seems to reproduce the evil of reality outside him. Falsity is *natural*, and to be a traitor is most normal.

The predicament of Macbeth and his wife is that, in contradistinction to the serpent, they are crushed by their guilt. They have “bad dreams,” as Hamlet would say, and these will bring them to their ruin. In fact they are not playing the roles of goodness at all, but rather those of evil. They feel from the outset that they are doing something profoundly unnatural, and even to themselves become images of nature outraged. Macbeth concludes his final speech in Act i with the words: “False face must hide what the false heart doth know.” Take note of this “false heart”; it is the weak link, the infirm pillar of the argument. A true Machiavellian
might feel that he had a false face, but never a false heart; the heart is what it is. If both are felt to be false, a contradiction arises, and one enters the realm of bad acting—that is, of evil that aims at being discovered. The entire second act of Macbeth is an illustration of this destiny of failure. The success of the criminal enterprise is only an apparent success. In the scene that follows the assassination of Duncan (ii, ii), Macbeth and his wife are already assailed by so much remorse that they court punishment and damnation. Suspicion immediately falls upon them: Malcolm and Donalbain, after clearly hinting at treason, depart in haste, as do Macduff and Ross in the following scene. In that scene an old man appears and closes the act with words of proverbial wisdom:

God's benison go with you, and with those
That would make good of bad and friends of foes!

[ii, iv, 40-41]

“Make good of bad” is a highly ambiguous phrase. It can mean the actual transformation of evil into good, which would conform with the traditional interpretation of Macbeth as a tragedy of the formidable struggle between the forces of good and evil (the former “natural” and the latter “unnatural”). But it can also mean “Blessed are those who make good of evil, making it appear so by altering its face”—a new Machiavellian precept addressed to a Macduff who later will evoke the damning epithet of traitor from Lady Macduff.

Meanwhile Macbeth, impetuously and for no apparent reason, has Banquo murdered. He then falls prey to hallucinations; when, at the banquet, his victim’s ghost appears, his reaction betrays his guilt, and everyone realizes that it was he who perpetrated the crime—a realization he subconsciously desires. Devastated by remorse, the husband and wife rush headlong to their ruin. They now resemble the serpent, though without the flower, and all their efforts to imitate nature notwithstanding, their actions end in becoming disimutation. To disimulate nature is to commit evil in such a way as to direct it against oneself. By the middle of the third act, Macbeth’s days are numbered:

Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy.

[iii, ii, 19-22]

Machiavelli taught that the virtù of the leader is judged by the effect of his action: if he loses his kingdom, he becomes a negative person, and all his sins will be revealed, as on Judgment Day. But the reverse is equally true: if he becomes a person who is manifestly negative, he inevitably loses his kingdom. In Richard III, an earlier tragedy in which there prevails an essentially anti-Machiavellian climate of conflict between the forces of good and evil, it is precisely the villain, who displays his acting ability. Vaunting his Machiavellianism, Richard will be routed by those forces he is incapable of counterfeiting: goodness triumphs over evil as truth over a lie, for in contrast to vice, goodness cannot disguise itself. Even when skillfully wielded, the power of the wicked endures only for the length of the performance; its life span is ineluctably limited. In Hamlet, however, it is the good character who must simulate in order to rend the fiction of the evildoers, those who perform well but not well enough to last to the end—an intuition that is halfway between the insights of Richard III and those of Macbeth. In the last play the villain has become a synonym, not for the actor, but for the bad actor. What happens to the positive characters in Macbeth? Are they like Richard’s vanquishers? Or do they in turn go through a metamorphosis? For if the conflict between an actor and his opposite is one between fiction and truth, the contrast between a bad actor and his opposite must manifest itself as the difference between a bad performance and a good one. We are then in a world composed entirely of actors, and if Macbeth is imperfect, who are those who manage with the skill of the accomplished actor?
Let us first consider Duncan. He does not appear to be taking part in a tragedy. Arriving at Macbeth's castle, he perceives it in an idyllic landscape (Banquo's observations on the delicate air and singing birds furnish an ironic commentary on Duncan's simplicity). The king is gentle and trusting, and it is his fate to let himself be killed. If the theme of the play were the struggle between good and evil, it would end at this point with the categorical victory of evil.

But now let us consider Malcolm, Duncan's son and claimant to the throne, and Macduff, a Scottish nobleman. In the roster of the drama's characters, these two are arrayed on the side of the just; when they meet (iv, iii), their animosity toward Macbeth is expressed in terms of harsh moral judgment. This scene immediately follows the massacre at Macduff's castle, and though the news has not yet reached them, it is in the air. Their dialogue is, in the main, taken from Holinshed, with Shakespeare adding certain allusive and strikingly ambiguous lines of his own. Not sure that he can trust Macduff, Malcolm repeatedly provokes him, and their exchanges become a skirmish in which the most dissimulated blows are the most decisive. Macduff's decision to flee, though he knows Macbeth's character and leaves his family defenseless, lacks all justification and can only be interpreted as either thoroughly unconscionable or deliberately criminal. I tend to accept the latter hypothesis, believing that the author himself had arrived at this conclusion in the course of writing the play.

Let us reconstruct this process of the play's composition: in the feverish haste with which Shakespeare composed the text—submerged as he was in the singular climate of the times and because of the personal and ideological crisis caused by his complex, contradictory feelings about the man who had commissioned the play—he followed Holinshed's plot for the first three acts, providing it with a fantastic and metaphorical form. The positive and negative characters were already prescribed, and there was no reason to alter their roles except for precautionary considerations about James, and then only in part. Meanwhile the play had acquired vertiginous contradictions in all of the established roles and a unique psychological penetration in the exploration of the nature of evil. When Malcolm and Macduff reappeared upon the scene in Act iv, it was difficult to present them as two new incarnations of “the power of good,” in the manner of Duncan, because Shakespeare now knew that this form of goodness is destined to fail, and knew too that the type of problem created by Macbeth's actions cannot be resolved by an antinomian counterpoising of black and white, chaos and rectitude, treason and legitimacy.

At this point Shakespeare must have been somewhat surprised by the Chronicle's description of the massacre at the castle, which furnished him with the only possible pretext for a reinterpretation of the character of Macduff. Shakespeare has made of this brief scene the center of an adamant problem which restates the question of life from the side of the good—that is, of the inevitable victims. This is done without parody, for Lady Macduff and her child are not trying to preserve any sort of power. They are genuinely and irrevocably betrayed, as Cordelia will be in King Lear; they are the truly good, the pure in heart spoken of in the Gospels, the foolish ones with neither hope nor reward in this world. As the child senses, an “honest” power cannot exist, and it is precisely the contradiction between honesty and power that the meeting of Malcolm and Macduff will help resolve.

Malcolm's first allusion to the question is in the following lines:

This tyrant, whose sole name blisters our tongues,  
Was once thought honest; you have lov'd him well;  
He hath not touch'd you yet. I am young; but something  
You may discern of him through me.

[iv, iii, 12-15]

Thus the Waith edition, (The Yale Shakespeare) which follows the 1623 folio; but the majority of modern
editors of *Macbeth* have substituted the word “deserve” for “discern” (among others, Kenneth Muir in the Arden *Macbeth* and J. Dover Wilson in the Cambridge edition). Even those who like Waith's rendition have been faithful to the folio, have entered into tortuous explanations of this passage, unable to accept the simplest implication of its meaning, which is: But you can see (recognize) in me (Malcolm) something of him (Macbeth). And if Macduff sees in Malcolm something he has in common with Macbeth, he will try to win his protection in the same way he would Macbeth's.

The text continues:

To offer up a weak, poor, innocent lamb
T' appease an angry god.

[iv, iii, 15-17]

In the light of the previous semantic construction, the traditional interpretation of this passage too needs revision. What Malcolm implies is: You have long been in the service of Macbeth; now join me. But where is your credibility? Thus far, we know, he has not touched you, but what guarantee can you give me of your new fidelity—*the lives of your dear ones perhaps*? However involuted and ambiguous his expression, this, it seems to me, is his meaning. If the words “innocent lamb” refer to Macduff’s family, then the “angry god” to be appeased is not Macbeth but rather Malcolm, who makes a show of defending himself while in fact attacking. Macduff grasps his meaning at once and retorts, “I am not treacherous” (l. 18). Malcolm now broadens the attack: That may well be true, but Macbeth is, and it is possible that you have been subjected to his malign influence; though you have a good and virtuous look, the brightest angels can come to ruin through sin. In short, I may conceivably trust you on the strength of your appearance. Malcolm is temporizing, inviting Macduff to reveal himself more fully but his interlocutor is a match for him. I have lost all hope, Macduff exclaims, taking refuge in a phrase that is intentionally vague. For Macduff is not in haste; he knows that soon there will be conclusive evidence of the hostility between him and Macbeth, and he will have no further need for words. Malcolm persists, however, seeking to anticipate him:

Perchance even there where I did find my doubts.
Why in that rawness left you wife and child,
Those precious motives, those strong knots of love,
Without leave-taking? I pray you,
Let not my jealousies be your dishonors,
But mine own safeties. You may be rightly just,
Whatever I shall think.

[iv, iii, 25-31]

This is a direct enough hit: Now you see that I know quite well what is going on—which still does not mean that I blame you. It all depends on what you have in mind. In his reply, Macduff guards against giving his reason for leaving his family unprotected, and instead, launches into a rhetorical apostrophe on the misfortunes of his country, after which he feigns a desire to leave: “I would not be the villain that thou think'st.” Which means, again translated into explicit terms: If you have grasped my meaning, I'll not let you say so openly. Detain me if you wish.

And Malcolm detains him (“Be not offended”) with a fresh and unexpected reversal. At this point in their confrontation a significant development is apparent: each knows that the other is aware of his performance. To refrain from committing an error in the presentation means to affirm the measure of one's stature, to be accepted for something beyond the words that are no more than the actor's disguise.
The power of this dialogue lies in its covert meaning; the two men are like chess players bent on settling a score, executing a series of brilliant tactical variations with false attacks and defensive retreats. The height of this exercise in skill is reached in Malcolm's famous profession of villainy. The episode is found in Holinshed, but Shakespeare, with unfailing mastery, places it before the disclosure of the massacre. Why do you wish me to be king? asks Malcolm. I am inordinately lustful; all your wives and daughters would not be enough to gratify my appetite. We can see to that, replies Macduff, still waiting to find out what he is driving at. I am excessively avaricious, continues Malcolm; I will possess myself of all your properties. A pernicious vice, responds Macduff, yet Scotland can satisfy it if you become king. After all, you have other merits. None, declares Malcolm; I am a sink of iniquity, a dunghill of depravity; nothing speaks in my favor. Then Macduff appears to abandon hope, delivers an eloquent monologue, and is on the point of parting from him for good when Malcolm confesses to having lied in order to test him.

When Holinshed's version of this episode is compared to Shakespeare's, several points of similarity are evident, but there is one decisive difference which seems not to have been remarked before. Holinshed's record of the dialogue gives credence to Macduff's good faith; both his alarm and his disillusionment are portrayed as sincere. In Shakespeare's play, however, they seem to me to be presented in a very different light. Here Malcolm is not trying to provoke Macduff's indignation, but to ascertain the degree to which he is capable of simulating indignation at a given moment. In short, he is testing him again, not as an upright man, but as an actor. Their dialogue, in a disguised form, echoes that between Richard and Buckingham in *Richard III*.

**RICHARD:**

Come, cousin, canst thou quake, and change thy colour,
Murther thy breath in middle of a word,
And then again begin, and stop again,
As if thou wert distraught and mad with terror?

**BUCKINGHAM:**

Tut! I can counterfeit the deep tragedian,
Speak and look back, and pry on every side,
Tremble and start at wagging of a straw,
Intending deep suspicion: ghastly looks
Are at my service, like enforced smiles.

[iii, v, 1-9]

Here Richard is the stronger and asks for a concrete demonstration of his ally's performing ability. The relation between the two characters has, in this instance, been explicitly defined, and the audience is not left in doubt. They are villains and must be revealed as such, whereas Malcolm and Macduff must continue to play their roles and can be understood only through the veil of words. Moreover, the audience—particularly that royal audience to which the author originally addressed the tragedy of *Macbeth*—must be reassured, and only one who so desires can penetrate the truth.
The essence of Malcolm's inquiry is: What will you do if I simulate such a monstrous character? And Macduff replies: For my part, I'll portray indignation. Malcolm is sufficiently satisfied with his response to launch into a monologue on his own virtues, which for the most part are of Shakespeare's devising. It is this speech that, in my opinion, offers conclusive proof of the author's transformation of the scene. In Holinshed, Malcolm is restricted to saying: “Be of good comfort Makduffe, for I haue none of these vices before remembered, but haue iested with thee in this manner, onelie to prooue thy mind.”

But Shakespeare's Malcolm says a good deal more:

Unknown to woman, never was forsworn,  
Scarcely have coveted what was mine own,  
At no time broke my faith, would not betray  
The devil to his fellow, and delight  
No less in truth than life. My first false speaking  
Was this upon myself.  

[iv, iii, 125-131]

A similar and equally extravagant self-portrait, with many points in common but with opposite intent, is that of Boccaccio's Ceppelletto (Decameron, i, 1), the first ante-litteram Machiavellian figure of the Italian tradition and one unquestionably representative of diabolical dissimulation. The catalogue of virtues turns out to be no less incredible than that of vices. Needing to find a definition of himself, the future monarch resorts to the idealization of the prince sanctioned by a secular literature. It is the portrait of a new Duncan. But Malcolm is not Duncan and knows the difference—a distinction absolutely clear to Machiavelli—between being good and seeming to be good; the distinction is decisive when a kingdom is at stake. In short, the meeting between Malcolm and Macduff represents the passage from black to white magic, from diabolic witchcraft to holy sorcery. Even the episode of the king as healer (a bow to James) can be viewed in this perspective. He embodies qualities of power and of ambition masked by saintliness which were seen in Malcolm and Macduff. This is in direct contrast to the witches, who expose the weakness of Macbeth, the criminal who appears to be exactly what he is.

The shedding of Machiavellian light over the entire play cannot help but alter its meaning. The antiprince polemic in Richard III indicated a remarkable faith in the possibility of separating the worlds of darkness and light, the heaven of virtue and the realm of fallen angels. Gloucester, the future king, who has already proclaimed himself a disciple of Machiavelli in Henry VI, Part III, proceeds to show himself for what he is in the opening monologue of Richard III, thus establishing the premises of his inevitable downfall. His personality exudes evil, as is instantly apparent in the symbolic deformation of his body, which causes dogs to bark at him as he limps by, as though they have caught the scent of sulphur. The frenetic crescendo of his actions transforms him into a monstrous bloodstained puppet. Clearly, he wants to reveal himself; the sanctimonious mien that has won popular sympathy is so obvious to the audience that it will become apparent sooner or later to his enemies. His defeat is proof of how a professed Machiavellianism fails to work. Evil, like a started beast, is brought to bay. The villain never ceases to be the villain: this is his theatrical destiny; hence in Richard III the struggle is still between the just and the unjust, the legitimate and the illegitimate. Richard and Buckingham are not only evil; they are the buffoons of evil. There is a kind of cheerful professionalism about their performances, at the conclusion of which they seem to execute a graceful pirouette and exit into the darkness, there to reside among the other puppets of evil.

Hamlet has brought to a crux a similar situation by opposing a world falsely shaped to the measure of harmonious and legitimate men: the court of Claudius, which conceals the infamy of a Richard. Yet Hamlet preserves a trace of the ancient optimism: evil is finally exposed, even at the cost of bringing the good to their ruin. Claudius' mise en scène cannot withstand the blows dealt it by Hamlet's mise en scène, and in the
revelation of this truth is inscribed the destiny that awaits the usurper. A king who proclaims his Machiavellianism (Richard) paves the way for his own downfall; a king whose Machiavellianism is exposed by others (Claudius) is on the brink of downfall. But a king who is genuinely Machiavellian—what is his image, his fate?

In the first place, his nature should not be perceptible either to the audience or to the other characters in the drama. The spectators and the actors form a system of communication within the theatrical experience: what is known to one group will be revealed to the other. An awareness by some of the characters cannot be withheld from the others except for a period of time in the course of the play's action. When Richard's wickedness is conveyed to the audience, it is only a matter of time before it is revealed to the characters in the play. As the protagonist of evil, Macbeth follows this same trajectory: the audience witnesses the evolution of his iniquity and confidently waits for its unmasking; were this not so, the tragedy would become a glorification of royal criminality, which is not Shakespeare's intention. With great circumspection and ambiguity, he ventures to represent, not the conflict between the forces of good and evil, but the conflict between *evil well performed* and *evil poorly performed*. If Macbeth and his wife, the two characters representing evil, succeed in achieving their goal, their victory will be total, and the audience too will be caught in the trap of verisimilitude.

The true Machiavellian prince is not one who seems to have read the treatise of that name, but one who, if anything, will write the anti-Machiavellian work, one to whom the Florentine's pages do not seem to apply, for a true Machiavellian prince must always appear to be good. Therefore Macbeth and Lady Macbeth fail in performance on the battlefield of power. The genuine leader is distinguished by a want of feeling for the afflictions of mankind. Remorse, not guilt, is the undoing of this homicidal couple; it is passion that renders them clumsy and fanciful, quick to succumb as soon as they are confronted by an effective foe. Let us examine the double prediction of the witches (this too has its origin in Holinshed) that harm can come to Macbeth from “none of woman born,” and that he will meet defeat only when the surrounding wood shall come to Dunsinane. The second prophecy is, above all, a spectacular device: Malcolm's army, screened by leafy boughs, advancing on Dunsinane is a splendid *coup de théâtre*, a translation into images of a truth that has risen to the surface of Shakespeare's consciousness—to wit, that Macbeth's enemies will defeat him on the plane of simulation and disguise. As for “none of woman born,” Macbeth takes the witches' augury as a guarantee of his invincibility, since there can be no such man. Apart from the literal explanation (before killing him, Macduff will disclose to Macbeth that he “was from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd”), the phrase means that only he who is able to defeat Macbeth *on the plane of his inhumanity* will be able to defeat him politically and militarily.

Does Macduff conform to this qualification? This is the question that Malcolm has been trying to solve by means of his verbal maneuvers with Macduff. Malcolm does not attempt to elicit a confession, which would be of no use to him in any case, but rather to understand his future lieutenant. Finally, the two men reach an understanding without having compromised themselves. At this point, following a brief laudatory reference to Edward the Confessor, Ross—he who was in such haste to take his leave of Lady Macduff—arrives on the scene. Coming from Scotland, he first gives them news of the state of the kingdom; but here again the real dialogue lies beneath the surface. Ross has been informed of the massacre of Macduff's family and has come to report it; finding Macduff in conclave with Malcolm, and ignorant as to whether or not they have reached an accord, he delays his announcement. His conduct, even before the murder of Lady Macduff, makes it clear that he is cognizant of Macduff's intentions. The first question put to him by Macduff—“Stands Scotland where it did? (iv, iii, 164)—it is strange, to say the least, inasmuch as he himself has just left that country. Is he perhaps asking something of a more specific nature? Ross dares not reply, deterred by the presence of Malcolm, who asks, “What's the newest grief?” to which he gives a vague and circumspect reply: “Each minute teems a new one.” Whereupon Macduff intervenes and speaks plainly:

MACDUFF:
How does my wife?

ROSS:

Why, well.

MACDUFF:

And all my children?

ROSS:

Well too.

[iii, iv, 176-177]

These four lines of dialogue are rather extraordinary, however they are understood. According to the common interpretation, Ross has come in a state of extreme anguish at having to report the horrifying tragedy. If this were true, a more cruel and unfeeling response would be hard to imagine. To say to Macduff that all is well with his family, then to tell him a few minutes later that they have been murdered, can hardly be construed as a sign of friendship. Moreover, Ross gives no evidence of being overcome by confusion; having just made a fine speech reverberating with elaborate imagery on the state of Scotland, he now does no more than repeat the one word “well,” sounding more like a dispassionate messenger than an anguished friend. In short, it seems to me quite evident that the two cousins are endeavoring to convey certain information to each other and are hindered from doing so by the presence of Malcolm—to say nothing of the presence of the principal spectator, a Scottish king only recently crowned king of England, and an audience that has come to witness the cathartic rite of evil punished and virtue rewarded. How would such an audience react were Ross to announce that the cousins’ scheme had succeeded, that Lady Macduff and her children were dead, and that nothing stood in the way of Macduff’s being appointed Malcolm's lieutenant and the murderer of Macbeth? In the light of certain analogies, the scene becomes less ambiguous. Ross's reply chillingly echoes an earlier moment in the play when Macbeth asks of Banquo's murderer (iii, iv, 26-27), “But Banquo's safe?” and elicits a similar if more explicit and heinously ironic answer: “Ay, my good lord: safe in a ditch he bides.”

Macduff perseveres: “The tyrant has not battered at their peace?” So he expected it. Why then did he do nothing to prevent the crime? This is Lady Macduff's question and Malcolm's too, though phrased more circumspectly. Ross adroitly extricates himself by playing on the double meaning of the words “at peace”: “they were well at peace when I did leave 'em.” Macduff cuts short this circuitous method of communication and brusquely demands: “Be not niggard of your speech: how goes 't?” Before replying, Ross seeks Malcolm's intervention in the conversation by announcing that conditions in Scotland are such that the country is ripe for revolt against Macbeth, and Malcolm instantly concurs. Now that the situation is clear and the two men of one mind, Ross no longer hesitates to reveal what everyone already knows. There ensues a dolorous recital by Macduff with the appropriate rhetorical exhortations to revenge. Enunciated by true professionals, it is concise, decorous, and assured. One rather revealing allusion appears in Macduff’s speech concerning the staging of the enterprise:

O, I could play the woman with mine eyes,
And braggart with my tongue.

[iii, iv, 230-232]

This has already been done, however, and now it is time to act, time for the final catastrophe. When Macbeth has at last been dispatched, Malcolm proclaims his plan of action, concluding with the words: “We will
perform in measure, time, and place.” He has referred to the Aristotelian principles of tragedy—even using the word “perform.” Here is the actor-king triumphantly reinstated after the poor performance of Macbeth, which he himself acknowledged in the words: “Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player. . . .” The great performance of sovereignty reaffirms its right; yet the problem remains: Is this choreography only meant to deceive the ingenuous?

If our reading of the dialogue between Malcolm and Macduff is given credence, their restoration to legitimacy is the restoration of a “correct” imitation of natural processes in which an apparent order cloaks the chaos of violence; according to the vision Shakespeare is evolving, “the serpent” is under “the innocent flower.” Macbeth had succeeded in imitating only the serpent, not nature's conjunction of the two; in imitating evil, he disimitated nature, arriving at an incomplete and vulnerable evil, like a serpent coming out into the open and making itself vulnerable. Let us recall the series of betrayals in the play. First there is the betrayal by the thane of Cawdor—a betrayal known to all and punished at the outset of the drama; this is followed by Macbeth's betrayal, immediately made known to the audience, then gradually to the other characters, and destined (theatrically destined) to be punished; finally there is Macduff's betrayal, known only to the victims and to those directly or indirectly implicated in the crime. And if the betrayal is not clearly revealed to the audience, it will go unpunished.

Here we see why Shakespeare gives only hints and clues to Macduff's behavior: the mysterious words muttered by an old man, Lady Macduff's sudden realization of the truth, the confrontation of Macduff and Malcolm. I also believe that another advance signal has been posted: the Porter's scene (ii, iii). Critics have recognized the historical references in his monologue and the symbolic dimension of the character: doorkeeper of Macbeth's castle is equivalent to doorkeeper of hell. If this is true, whoever is knocking at the gates at that moment is probably a damned soul. The words “Remember the porter” at the end of the monologue would seem to be an exhortation to remember the symbolism of the scene—that men are knocking at the gate of hell, where Beelzebub awaits them. And who is knocking? None other than Macduff, the first to speak to the Porter. Who indeed should it be if not this future traitor, of whom it might be said, as of an equivocator, that he “committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven.” It is no mere chance that Macduff's companion in this scene is another traitor, Lennox, who will convey the news to Macbeth that “Macduff is fled to England” (iv, i).

It is difficult to say when Shakespeare conceived the idea of including this scene in the play; the general opinion is that the Porter's monologue was a later addition, creating what amounts to a break in the action of the drama. One might venture a guess that these lines were composed when doubts about the character of Macduff arose in the mind of the author, and when the device of playing with allusion was woven into the texture of the play. Taken alone, any one of the episodes that I have analyzed would be inconclusive, but together they create a picture which does not correspond to the usual interpretation of Macduff as a positive hero. The new picture is rather appalling. The good are murdered (Duncan, Lady Macduff); the villains who kill them are themselves crushed (Macbeth and his wife); the archvillain lets the villain destroy the good, then destroys the villain and assumes the role of the good. All joust to win the leading roles in the cast of life.

In the course of their dialogue, the characters of Malcolm and Macduff acquire a new reflective consciousness; the action is momentarily interrupted as they take each other's measure. The masks and disguises handed down from the oldest theatrical tradition are now become flesh and blood, part of the characters' identity. The king is an actor. The extent to which this identification is linked to the transition of power in England is shown in Measure for Measure, which appeared in 1604, a year after the death of Queen Elizabeth. The play is interlaced with allusions to contemporary conditions, but sufficiently altered to avoid giving offense. The new leader, in the person of Angelo, appears to be nefarious, but the duke, who disguises himself as a monk and keeps watch from the shadows, returns to set everything right. This was perhaps what Shakespeare's contemporaries expected: but such hopes could be satisfied only in the realm of fable. Where does lost sovereignty end? On some remote island, and one must travel to the end of Prospero's world in The
Tempest to rediscover it. The shipwreck, the terrifying opening scene, is the destruction of royal hopes; the tragedy is conveyed in a few lines, in a cry of horror and in silence. For the action to continue, the setting must be transposed to myth. This solution implies an altered awareness of sovereignty.

After the revelation of Macbeth, and Ulysses' speech in Troilus and Cressida, which we have defined as a well-spoken lie, there are two other decisive ideological moments in Shakespeare's theater. The first is Menenius Agrippa's apologue in Coriolanus. Near the beginning of the play, (i, i, 100ff.), Menenius, a reincarnation of Polonius, explains to the mutinous citizens the function of the senate-belly, inventing the famous tale of the body's members. He is listened to with understandable impatience; the speech is a parodic distortion of Ulysses' florid eloquence. Here the concept of social harmony is supported by a lie ill-spoken and is patently absurd. This speech is but a step to the second instance, represented by the rage in Timon of Athens. In the protagonist's desperate monologues, the social harmony that justifies power is ultimately revealed as substantial inharmony camouflaged by virtuous appearance: “for there is boundless theft / In limited professions.” Further, Timon says to the bandits:

That you are thieves profess'd, that you work not
In holier shapes.

[iv, iii, 431-433]

Here, with unmistakable precision, is what Macduff's son had intuited. The universal social larceny is but a reflection of the natural cosmic inharmony. Timon says:

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
Robs the vast sea: the moon's an arrant thief,
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun.
The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves
The moon into salt tears: the earth's a thief,
That feeds and breeds by a composture stol'n
From general excrement: each thing's a thief:
The laws, your curb and whip, in their rough power
Has unchecked theft.

[iv, iii, 441-450]

Only in his late works does Shakespeare attempt to move beyond this extreme conception and toward an ideal of timeless harmony. This attempt involves a re-examination of the very concept of life, and is increasingly represented as an allegorical function of a mysterious justice which is cadenced by the “music of the spheres” announcing the happy ending of Pericles; by Ariel's song accompanying his prodigies as a sprite in The Tempest; by the secret music ending Cymbeline and Henry VIII; and by the music awaking Hermione from her statue-like sleep in The Winter's Tale. We are now well beyond Macbeth, on a horizon that calls for fresh explorations, new explorers.

As for Macbeth, with his mind “full of scorpions,” he is a lion incapable of transforming himself into a fox, and is propelled toward a death he accepts as a deliverance. His monologue after Lady Macbeth's death would not be accepted by his enemies: for the victors, the world regains meaning. Only in defeat is life seen for what it is; but the cry of anguish is proof of nothing but defeat itself. This is perhaps true of life as well as of art. Thus The Prince would appear to be an ars poetica helping to define a world where pure sentiments are annihilated like innocent victims, where excessive ambition is mere folly, and where artifice and cunning conquer, leaving their audiences bewitched. Is he who rules by the word perhaps he who has penetrated most deeply into reality? Are the words of Timon to be trusted?
There's nothing level in our cursed natures
But direct villainy.

[iv, iii, 18-20]

**Criticism: Themes: R. A. Foakes (essay date 1982)**


*[In the following essay, Foakes characterizes Macbeth as Shakespeare's most complex examination of ambition and its brutal potential.]*

*Macbeth* is Shakespeare's last and most original play on the theme of the ambitious prince finally overthrown. Its roots lie deep in the medieval and Renaissance preoccupation with tragedy as the fall of great men or women, brought low by fortune's wheel and so exemplifying the mutability of human life, or overreaching themselves and illustrating the retribution visited upon the proud and sinful. It was natural for Shakespeare to explore the possibilities for tragedy of

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sad stories of the death of kings:
How some have been depos'd, some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have depos'd,
Some poison'd by their wives, some sleeping kill'd,
All murder'd.
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(*Richard II*, III.ii.156-60)

In writing his early plays he had the impact of Marlowe to absorb, who had broken the moralising pattern of such stories as mirrors for magistrates by showing Tamburlaine striding on to ever further conquests, and endowed with a mind aspiring to beauty and poetry as well as to power and an earthly crown. The *Henry VI* plays are full of aspiring princes, and culminate in the rise of Gloucester, whose ruthless ambition is qualified by his wit and energy; these plays, and *Richard III,* nevertheless remain within the conventional pattern. A much more complex study of an ambitious prince is realised in Bolingbroke, who, without seeming to recognise the extent of his ambitions, overthrows and effectively murders Richard II, and achieves the throne, only to be punished by ill health, by constant rebellions, and by the vagaries of Prince Hal. A further variant is developed in Brutus, whose confidence in his own rectitude, the name of ‘honour’ for which his line has always been noted, blinds him to the true nature of the murder of Caesar. Then, in *Hamlet,* Shakespeare was to develop still subtler variations, in Claudius, a ‘good’ and effective monarch who, we discover, has gained the throne by murder, and in Hamlet himself, driven by events to act as if he were indeed, as he says to Ophelia, ‘very proud, revengeful, ambitious’ (*Hamlet* III.i.124), but delaying and avoiding action in an attempt to escape from the implications of what he feels he must do, kill Claudius.

Superficially, *Macbeth* seems to return to a more conventional mode, and on one level it is much more straightforwardly a play about an ambitious prince who overreaches himself in murdering the King, and who brings about his own downfall in the end. But it goes beyond Shakespeare's earlier treatments of the theme, notably in two ways. One is the new dimension given by the witches, and the sense of evil which is generated largely through their presence in the play; for this enables Shakespeare to show a more profound spiritual change in Macbeth than in any of his earlier protagonists. Bolingbroke and Claudius feel their guilt, but Macbeth is shown as creating his own hell. In this the play has links with Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus,* but whereas Faustus achieves nothing in return for selling his soul, and in the end, terrified at the prospect of punishment, is whisked off by devils into a traditional stage hell-mouth, Shakespeare expresses dramatically...
through his presentation of Macbeth that subtler idea of hell verbalised in Mephistopheles' description of it as ‘being depriv'd of everlasting bliss’ (Scene III, l.82). Faustus himself seems to begin to understand this in his curses at the end:

That hath depriv'd thee of the joys of heaven;

(Scene XIX, ll.181-2)

but in Marlowe's play hell as deprivation remains merely a concept. It remained for Shakespeare to realise on stage what this means in terms of character.

A second way in which Shakespeare breaks new ground in Macbeth is in his deeper study of the nature of ambition, which is the special concern of this essay. Ambition is usually understood in its straightforward sense as an eagerness to gain promotion and power, to rise in the world, and, as Duncan's general in the field, Macbeth might be expected to fit Bacon's conception in ‘Of Ambition’: ‘Good Commanders in the Warres, must be taken, be they never so Ambitious. … And to take a Soldier without Ambition, is to pull off his Spurres.’ Charles Lamb saw further than this in a striking comment provoked by the actor G. F. Cooke's playing of Richard III as a ‘very wicked man’ who kills for pleasure:1

The truth is, the Characters of Shakespeare are so much the objects of meditation rather than of interest or curiosity as to their actions, that while we are reading any of his great criminal characters—Macbeth, Richard, even Iago,—we think not so much of the crimes which they commit, as of the ambition, the aspiring spirit, the intellectual activity, which prompts them to overleap those moral fences.

Lamb was led to notice something especially significant in Macbeth—that the emphasis when we read the play is less on what he does than on the activity of mind connected with his deeds. Lamb strikingly linked, perhaps equated, ambition, aspiration and intellectual activity, in a way which now may seem a little eccentric. For on the one hand, the meaning of ambition is more restricted than this on the one occasion when Macbeth speaks the word, at that point towards the end of Act I when he comes nearest to abandoning the murder of Duncan. At this moment of revulsion against the killing of the King,

We will proceed no further in this business,

(I.vii.31)

Macbeth reduces all that has been exciting him in the contemplation of the death of Duncan to 'only vaulting ambition', the mere desire to be King. This would seem to justify the claim that2

Macbeth has not a predisposition to murder; he has merely an inordinate ambition that makes murder itself seem to be a lesser evil than failure to achieve the crown.

On the other hand, Lamb's comment reduces to a subordinate role the moral issues which to many have seemed of primary importance. The play has been seen as effectively a morality, with an action that can be summarised thus:3

Its hero is worked upon by forces of evil, yields to temptation in spite of all that his conscience can do to stop him, goes deeper into evil-doing as he is further tempted, sees the approach of retribution, falls into despair, and is brought by retribution to his death.
This way of regarding Macbeth as an exemplary play displaying the degeneration of a great criminal who has ‘no morally valid reason for killing Duncan’, has satisfied many, although it does not account for a sense that somehow, in spite of everything, Macbeth retains an heroic stature at the end, when ‘in the very act of proclaiming that life “is a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing” personal life announces its virtue, and superbly signifies itself.’ Lascelles Abercrombie’s extraordinary use here of the word ‘virtue’ may be related to Wilson Knight’s view that Macbeth ‘has won through by excessive crime to an harmonious and honest relation with his surroundings. … He now knows himself to be a tyrant confessed, and wins back … integrity of soul.’

The word ‘ambition’ is used only three times in the play, and always in simple relation to the idea of worldly power, of gaining the throne, as when Lady Macbeth says her husband is ‘not without ambition’ (I.v.16), or Ross explains the supposed guilt of Malcolm and Donalbain for the death of Duncan in terms of ‘thriftless ambition’ (II.iv.28). The compulsion that drives Macbeth is more complex than this, and requires further analysis. A better understanding of why Macbeth does what he does may in turn help to explain the curious contradictions that tend to emerge in the common moralistic accounts of the play, which are torn between condemning him as a criminal and rescuing a grandeur, integrity, even virtue for him at the end. A sense of this difficulty has in part prompted a recent account of Macbeth as lacking ‘the requisite moral sense and agony of conscience that any proper tragic hero must have’; this is a response to critics who see Macbeth as essentially good, when he has ‘neither moral sense nor awareness of its existence’. Such an account of Macbeth may seem a strange, even perverse, reading, but it stems from a genuine problem, and involves an important recognition, that Macbeth’s ‘imagination is not under his control; he is its creature.’ For another common assumption about Macbeth is that because he has great poetry to speak he must be an ‘intellectual giant’; when a very important question the text raises is how far Macbeth understands his own words.

Moralistic accounts of Macbeth as falling into temptation, committing a terrible crime and ending in despair, pass too readily by the question that haunts the first two acts, why does Macbeth kill Duncan? It seems plain that he has thought of such a possibility before meeting the witches, or at least that his starting at their greetings of him (I.iii.51) registers his awareness at this moment that what they say gives conscious expression to a half-formed image; and this is confirmed by the first scene in which Lady Macbeth appears, for the death of Duncan is already an idea familiar to her, even to the murder weapon, the ‘keen knife’ that is to do the deed (I.v.49). If the thought of murdering Duncan is already there, so to speak, in the minds of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, then the notion of Macbeth as tempted needs further scrutiny. The Weird Sisters announce that Macbeth will be king, and since their other prophecy, that he will be Thane of Cawdor, is immediately fulfilled, what they say might rather prompt him to sit tight than to plot to murder the King. Whatever it is that tempts Macbeth to do the deed is in himself and in his wife. And yet, hard on receiving notice of his new ‘honour’, the title of Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth reveals that he is already thinking of murder.

The context for all this is the opening of the play, with its emphasis on the butchery of war. According to Holinshed Macdonwald killed himself in his castle, and Macbeth, finding the dead body, and ‘remitting no piece of his cruel nature’, cut the head off and sent it as a present to Duncan. In the play the bleeding Captain describes a much stranger image of death. Macbeth, brandishing his sword, ‘which smok’d with bloody execution’, as if burning with rage, or steaming with hot blood, ‘carv’d’ a passage through men to confront the living Macdonwald:

Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops,
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

(I.ii.21-3)
The suggestion of ripping Macdonwald's flesh like cloth from the navel to the jaws completes an image of startling ferocity, quite overshadowing the attribute of courage in ‘brave Macbeth. … Like Valour's minion’. It is as if Macbeth delights in such brutal killing, and loves

\[
\text{to bathe in reeking wounds} \\
\text{Or memorize another Golgotha,}
\]

(I.ii.40-1)

Is the force of this to suggest that in the heat of battle Macbeth and Banquo destroy all indiscriminately who come in their way, turning the battlefield into another place of a skull, or dead bones? Are they being likened to the soldiers who crucified Christ?

The bleeding captain's narrative of the battle is supported by the report of Ross, who, on the immediate sentencing of Cawdor to death, is sent to greet Macbeth from the King:

\[
\text{He finds thee in the stout Norweyan ranks} \\
\text{Nothing afeard of what thyself didst make,} \\
\text{Strange images of death.}
\]

(I.iii.95-7)

Here, in these opening scenes, if anywhere, Macbeth comes near to being represented as a ‘butcher’ (V.viii.69), so habituated to the horror of the battlefield that he is untroubled by the ‘strange images of death’ he makes and sees all round him.

Yet it is at this point he learns he is Thane of Cawdor: the Weird Sisters have told two truths—he is Thane of Glamis ‘by Sinel's death’ (I.iii.71), and Thane of Cawdor because the previous holder of the title has just been executed. Shakespeare omits to tell his audience that Sinel was, according to Holinshed, Macbeth's father, and so leaves us to suppose that Sinel too may have met a violent end. Within a short space Macbeth has his first soliloquy in the form of a long aside on ‘the imperial theme’ (I.iii.129) which has already been troubling his imagination, and he now sees an image of death he cannot face so easily:

\[
\text{why do I yield to that suggestion} \\
\text{Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair} \\
\text{And make my seated heart knock at my ribs} \\
\text{Against the use of nature? Present fears} \\
\text{Are less than horrible imaginings:} \\
\text{My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,} \\
\text{Shakes so my single state of man} \\
\text{That function is smother'd in surmise,} \\
\text{And nothing is but what is not}
\]

(I.iii.134-42)

The ‘horrid image’ of murder is stranger than any of the earlier images of death, and it both terrifies him and excites him. It is part of the ‘swelling act Of the imperial theme’, with the promise of the crown as reward, and at the same time it fills him with present fears and horrible imaginings. He attributes the suggestion or image to ‘supernatural soliciting’, as if the Weird Sisters have incited or importuned him, and are responsible for the disturbance of his mind; but they have merely announced that he will be King, and as Macbeth knows, ‘chance may crown me Without my stir’ (I.iii.143-4). He has realised a new kind of challenge, one which so shakes his ‘single state of man’, suggesting something like an earthquake afflicting his individual little kingdom or ‘state’, that ordinary activity is stifled, and only ‘what is not’, those ‘horrible imaginings’, seems
real. The speech records Macbeth's horror at, and fascination with, a new vision of death—not the brutal and casual slaughter of the battlefield, but the calculated murder of a king.

In Holinshed's account, the Weird Sisters first appear after the conclusion of peace between the Scots and the Danes, when Macbeth and Banquo meet them. Shakespeare introduces them in the opening scene, so that they contribute to the creation of atmosphere right away, and establish a sense of distance from the world of the audience. The first few scenes build up the suggestion of a barbaric and violent world, one in which Macbeth is habituated to images of death. The new image that first confronts him in I.iii, "My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical", fascinates him as a new challenge. In Holinshed, Macbeth only thinks of using force against Duncan after Malcolm has been nominated as 'successor in the kingdome', but in the play Macbeth has already imagined the death of the King before the advancement of Malcolm is mentioned in I.iv, echoing in his word 'fantastical' Banquo's question to the Weird Sisters, 'Are ye fantastical, or that indeed / Which outwardly ye show?' (I.iii.53-4). The boundary between the fantastical, the imaginary or illusory, and actuality is indeterminate, as Macbeth proceeds to create a new image of death.

For Macbeth the gap between the familiar images of death on the battlefield or by execution and the new image is terrifying, and his speeches, especially the soliloquies, in the scenes leading up to the killing of Duncan, record his difficulties in bridging that gap. His sense of the enormity of the act is made all the more impressive in relation to the Weird Sisters, whose stark malevolence is brought home in their vindictiveness towards the 'master o' th 'Tiger' (I.iii.7); it is also presented in sharp contrast to Lady Macbeth's coolness, for her unfamiliarity with images of death perhaps makes it easy for her to contemplate the murder of Duncan without anxiety. Coleridge thought of her as having a ‘visionary and day-dreaming turn of mind’, ‘accustomed only to the Shadows of the Imagination, vivid enough to throw the every day realities into shadows, but not yet compared with their own correspondent realities’; it seems to me rather that Shakespeare presents her as lacking a fullness of imagination, as able only to envisage the deed as a triumph of the will. In her terrible soliloquy in I.v she turns herself by an act of will into another Weird Sister, shedding her sex (‘unsex me here’, I.v.38) and suppressing pity and remorse, so that when Macbeth enters at the end of it she greets him with an echo of the Weird Sisters' greeting in I.iii:

Great Glamis! Worthy Cawdor!  
Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!

(I.v.52-3)

She has indeed been ‘transported’ beyond the present, and feels ‘The future in the instant’, as if she were a wizard; so she has no thought of him as a man, of his battle-scars, of what he has endured, and overleaps the past and present in the glow of anticipated success. At the same time, she has no experience of death itself, and her confused image of the murder obscures it as if she is unable to see the deed:

Come, thick night,  
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,  
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark  
To cry, “Hold, hold.”

(I.v.50-4)

‘Thick night’ is so to obscure ‘thee’ (Duncan? or the knife?) that the wound will not be seen; and the distancing of the deed from herself under a pall of smoke is accentuated by the transference of vision from herself to the knife, which is not to ‘see’ what it does. Metaphorically the knife becomes a free agent acting on its own; her words evade the deed, as if she cannot bear to see the weapon, or the wound it makes, or the actual shape of the man to be murdered.
Macbeth, by contrast, sees the weapon and the deed clearly enough. Familiar as he is with images of death, the unpremeditated slaughter of the battlefield, this new image, requiring the planning of a murder, makes him ‘afeard’, and brings a new strain to bear on the courage and imagination of ‘brave Macbeth’. He has to contemplate what he is about:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject—
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself.

(I.vii.12-16)

It is more than a ‘double trust’—Duncan is his kinsman, his King, his guest in his own home, and, Shakespeare suggests, a surrogate father-figure, and a holy man. Here again Holinshed’s account is transformed, in which Duncan and Macbeth are roughly the same age, while Duncan, ‘soft and gentle of nature’, is merely a rather weak and incompetent monarch. Shakespeare changes their relationship so as to maximise the horror and challenge in the killing of the King. It is no ordinary murder, but rather the equivalent in its own kind of, say, breaking through the sound barrier for the first time. Macbeth fully recognises the ‘deep damnation’ of such a deed, and sees what it will give birth to, the ‘naked babe’ of pity, stirring universal sorrow for the victim, and hatred for the murderer.

His soliloquy at the beginning of I.vii ends with his one reference to ambition, as the only ‘spur’ to prick on his intention, and at this point he has talked himself into abandoning the project. Lady Macbeth enters to rouse him by calling him ‘coward’, invoking a concept of manliness, and reducing the issue to gaining the crown:

Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would'?

(I.vii.41-4)

As earlier, she avoids confronting the murder itself, or translates it into a more familiar, if revolting, image of what she might have done, in dashing out the brains of her own child. For her it is a matter of Macbeth screwing ‘his courage to the sticking place’, and she seems to miss a dimension present in Macbeth’s,

I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.

(I.vii.46-7)

What does it ‘become’ a man to do? In one sense this suggests actions that grace a man, as in the penitent death of Cawdor,

Nothing in his life
Became him like the leaving it.

(L.iv.7-8)

At the same time Macbeth’s words raise a question about the limits of human action; at what point should daring stop? Daring is what Macbeth is known for, as ‘valour’s minion’ (I.ii.19), and Lady Macbeth effectually prompts him in terms that remind him of this; she displaces his brooding on the enormity of the
deed and its consequence with the renewed sense of challenge, and he goes off resolved to

Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.

(I.vii.79-80)

She is oblivious to the terror of the feat, but succeeds in making it again for him part of the fascination of a daring beyond anything he has faced before.

This is brought home in his soliloquy in the next scene, in that ‘fatal vision’ (II.i.36) of the dagger, fatal as deadly, as foreboding his own as well as Duncan’s death, and as inescapable, fateful. The dagger of the air is terrifying, but embodies too Macbeth's desire to achieve the deed. The dagger of the mind is, in its way, as real as the one Macbeth draws, though conjured out of words. At first it is a duplicate of the one he holds, but as it ushers him towards Duncan the illusory dagger changes:

And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,
Which was not so before.

(II.i.45-7)

At first symbolising his terror and desire to do the deed, it then becomes an emblem of the deed achieved, and as the vision fades, Macbeth's soliloquy ends with a series of images willing his identification with the powers of darkness, even as they register the ‘present horror’ of the moment. The lines suggest a link with the Weird Sisters, in their reference to witchcraft and to Hecate, and mark Macbeth's awareness that he is aligning himself with evil; but his full sense of the terrible nature of the murder he is about to do also makes the overcoming of his own scruples, of the horror he feels, of all the large part of himself that rebels against it, so much the greater challenge. The central lines of his soliloquy register this:

Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going,
And such an instrument I was to use.
Mine eyes are made the fools o’ th’ other senses,
Or else worth all the rest.

(II.i.42-5)

These lines reaffirm the double nature of that image of the death of Duncan which Macbeth sees here in the visionary dagger; his eyes are worth all the other senses in so far as they show through this illusion what is compelling him from within. When in the next scene Macbeth returns from the murder with two bloody daggers, one in each hand, the vision of his soliloquy here is made actual on the stage, and characteristically, this moment of triumph is also the moment when his sense of terror and guilt are maximised:

I am afraid to think what I have done;
Look on't again I dare not.

(II.ii.51-2)

This scene powerfully registers Macbeth's feelings immediately after the murder, when he is appalled by what he has done. The revulsion of the moment, marvellously expressed in the image of the blood on his hands staining the seas and ‘Making the green one red’ (II.ii.63), confirms the magnitude as well as the horror of the deed. But this quickly passes, for we learn in the next scene that Macbeth has returned to the scene of the crime to confront another image of death when he kills the grooms, accounting for it in terms of anger and
love for Duncan. Whatever other explanations may be adduced for Lady Macbeth fainting at this point, the news of the killing of the grooms is enough to account for it. Here Macbeth's explanation shows how far he has gone beyond her in taking the initiative on his own; killing the grooms in addition to the King was not in her thoughts, and this marks the point at which she begins to lose him. He was at first horrified at his own deed in killing Duncan, but can return to look on the dead King and kill the grooms without a qualm:

His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood;
And his gash'd stabs look'd like a breach in nature
For ruin's wasteful entrance: there, the murderers,
Steep'd in the colours of their trade, their daggers
Unmannerly breech'd with gore. Who could refrain,
That had a heart to love, and in that heart
Courage to make's love known?

(II.iii.110-7)

Killing the grooms is nothing for him after killing Duncan, but paradoxically it shocks Lady Macbeth as a consequence she had not foreseen when she said, ‘The sleeping and the dead Are but as pictures’ (II.ii.53-4). For Macbeth the murder of Duncan was the equivalent in mountaineering terms of scaling Everest, and after this he has no trouble with lower hills; but Lady Macbeth never feels the magnitude or the horror of killing the King, whose murder is for her merely the means of fulfilling her ambition that her husband shall wear the crown, ‘the golden round’ (I.v.25), and she supposes that the death of Duncan finishes the business:

A little water clears us of this deed;
How easy is it then!

(II.ii.67-8)

The further killing of the grooms begins also to bring home to her what Macbeth has felt all through, not how easy, but how difficult it is both to kill a king, and then to be ‘clear’ of the deed, and ‘trammel up the consequence’ (I.vii.3).

Although Macbeth felt the weight of the consequences of the murder,

Bloody instructions, which being taught return
To plague th'inventor,

(I.vii.8-10)

he did not foresee what they would be. The worst is that having scaled Everest, he finds soon that he must overcome an obstacle almost as great, another kingly figure who fills him with dread:

Our fears in Banq

Stick deep; and in his royalty of nature
Reigns that which would be fear'd.

(III.i.48-50)

The ‘bloody instructions’ he gives the murderers return to plague him in the banquet scene, when the ghost of Banquo sits in his place.
When Simon Forman saw the play at the Globe in the spring of 1611 he recorded the way in which the first entry of the ghost was played: 19

The next night, being at supper with his noble men whom he had bid to a feast to the which also Banquo should have come, he began to speak of Noble Banquo, and to wish that he were there. And as he thus did, standing up to drink a Carouse to him, the ghost of Banquo came and sat down in his chair behind him. And he turning about to sit down again saw the ghost of Banquo, which fronted him so, that he fell into a great passion of fear and fury.

Lady Macbeth, who does not see the ghost, relates this apparition to the ‘air-drawn dagger’ Macbeth saw in II.i, and many leading actors, from John Philip Kemble in 1786 and Edwin Booth in 1828 down to Ian McKellen in 1976, have treated the ghost as another figment of Macbeth’s ‘heat-oppressed brain’. 20 A good actor can indeed create a sense that he alone sees some appalling vision which terrifies him, and perhaps this is more acceptable to modern audiences less ready to believe in ghosts; but it seems that in Shakespeare’s time an actor played the ghost, and Macbeth and the audience actually witnessed here another image of death. The ghost with his ‘gory locks’ echoes visually the First Murderer who came with blood upon his face (III.iv.13) to report the death of Banquo, and the blood smeared upon the faces of the grooms accused by Macbeth of killing Duncan (II.ii.50, 56; II iii.114). Macbeth recognises the Ghost simultaneously as real, ‘Avaunt, and quit my sight!’ (III.iv.93), and unreal,

Unreal mock’ry, hence!

Hence, horrible shadow!

(III.iv.106-7)

It is appropriate that the audience should have this sense too, and see embodied on stage the cause of Macbeth’s fear. Macbeth can boast with reason ‘What man dare, I dare’ (III.iv.99), for he has achieved a most ‘terrible feat’ in killing Duncan and Banquo; but the consequences include something he had not bargained for at all, the ‘strange infirmity’ (III.iv.86) that unmans him in trembling, as his murders leave him still ‘bound in To saucy doubts and fears’ (III.iv.24-5).

The banquet scene brings him to an important recognition about his condition:

Stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o’er.

(III.iv.136-8)

This picks up again the image of the multitudinous seas stained with blood, but with a difference marked especially in the word ‘tedious’: now, wading in that flood of blood he has spilt, he begins to realise that the excitement has gone, and the only way left for him is the repetitive boredom of further bloodshed as he ensures that ‘All causes shall give way’ (III.iv.136). His next move is to bully the Weird Sisters, confronting them as if he could command them; ‘More shall they speak’ he had said at the end of the banquet scene (III.iv.134), and his imperative echoes in ‘I conjure you … answer me’ (IV.i.50-1). Perhaps the best justification for the Hecate scene is that it exposes Macbeth’s desperation and the emptiness of his imperatives, which are countered by those of Hecate:

that, distill'd by magic sleights,
Shall raise such artificial sprites
As, by the strength of their illusion,
Shall draw him on to his confusion.
The three apparitions produced by the Weird Sisters rise and descend, if the Folio directions are followed, requiring actors to play them, or perhaps a kind of voice-over or ventriloquism by one of the witches. They must be seen by everyone on stage and the audience. The first, an armed head, both suggests Macduff (‘Beware the thane of Fife’), and anticipates the bringing on of the head of the dead Macbeth at the end of the play. The second, a bloody child, seems at once an image of birth and death, saying to Macbeth that none of woman born shall harm him, but connecting for the audience with the other images of the spilling of blood in the play, and anticipating Macbeth's readiness to murder even the children of Macduff. The third, a child crowned with a tree in its hand, seems to promise security to Macbeth, but symbolises too what is brought home in the final ‘show’ of kings, that Banquo's line will inherit the throne. These are all externally created shows, stage-managed by the Witches, culminating in another appearance of the Ghost of Banquo, bloody as in III.ii, who must be played by an actor,

For the blood-bolter'd Banquo smiles upon me,  
And points at them for his.  

So the visions Macbeth imagined earlier, the air-drawn dagger, and the Ghost of Banquo unseen by the others at the banquet, were more ‘real’ and emotionally disturbing than those apparitions or shows witnessed by all. This scene marks the change in Macbeth; the dagger and the Ghost terrified him as images of murder that appalled him, and these figures of his imagination embodied his moral fear, his conscience and sense of guilt as well as his deep desire and compulsion to achieve the ultimate in killing. Now, in seeking out the Witches, and demanding to see the worst they can show, he is no longer afraid of such images. The culmination of the scene is the return of Banquo's ghost, an image which sears Macbeth's eyeballs, but not with terror any more, merely with anger. Macbeth's ability to face these images and ask for more until he is confronted again by the murdered Banquo, shows how far he has travelled morally and mentally since the opening of the play; once unable to look on what he has done, or to think of what he was about to do without perturbation, he is now no longer troubled by sights that might appal. He has lost his sense of fear, and is no longer shocked or disturbed by blood and killing. He has found his routine, and the tedium that goes with it.

At this point, the end of IV.i, Shakespeare removes his protagonist from the stage for the equivalent of about an act of the play, or roughly 420 lines. This is in accordance with his practice in the other central tragedies, and quite apart from giving the leading actor a well-earned rest, it serves a deeper function. Macbeth has passed beyond the point of no return, and terrible deeds no longer shock or disturb him. What remains in action is the confirmation of this in the murder of Lady Macduff and her children, and the gathering of the forces that will bring about Macbeth's downfall; for Macbeth himself there is yet to come the full recognition of what has happened to him, of the wasteland he has created for himself. The destruction of the innocent mother and children can be seen as analogous to Richard III's murder of the princes in the Tower, as marking the last degradation of the criminal, but in Macbeth's case the effect is more complex, for it is also in some sense a breakthrough for him, a liberation from the ‘terrible dreams’ and ‘torture of the mind’ (III.ii.18,21) which afflicted him. In relation to this Shakespeare's finest stroke of irony is to place Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking scene before the reappearance of Macbeth. The two have moved in opposite directions mentally, and she is now in a condition not unlike that of Macbeth before the murder of Duncan; when he saw visionary daggers and imagined nothing could wash away his blood-guilt, she had no apparent sense of horror; but as he has moved from a state of emotional turmoil and moral anxiety to one of blank indifference, so her cool self-command has given way, and the disturbance of her mind is now expressed in nightmare images like that of the blood on her hand and the bell striking ‘One, two; why then 'tis time to do't’ (V.i.33-4).
Here the horror of the murder of Duncan is borne in on us again just prior to the return of Macbeth, who, by contrast feels nothing, so that even the news of her death has no effect on him, except to prompt his last and most profound acknowledgment of his loss of all sense of guilt or feeling for others. The difference between Macbeth in IV.i and Macbeth in V.v lies not in his condition, but in his discovery of its nature and implications, and of the price he has paid for his liberation from fear. This is most marked not in the merely selfish disappointment at losing the social rewards and pleasures of growing old, such as ‘honour, love, obedience, troops of friends’ (V.iii.25), but in the wider reverberations of his inability to respond to the death of his wife:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(V.v.19-28)

Here the collapse of time, the future (‘to-morrow’), the present (marvellously signalled in the word ‘creeps’), and past (‘All our yesterdays’), into the boredom of mere repetition betrays Macbeth’s crushing sense of deprivation, and now what reverberates is not the loss merely of social rewards, but of any reason for remaining alive.

In this speech too the image of the ‘poor player’ is especially poignant. It daringly reminds us of the actor playing the King, and by extension of ourselves playing roles, strutting and fretting, and so generates sympathy for Macbeth; at the same time, it brings home to us, through the weight of the action of the play that lies behind the lines, how inadequate such a definition of life is. For life had meant more for Macbeth than this, in his ambition to be King, to rule in Scotland and found a dynasty, to be a ‘man’, an heroic warrior, to be honoured and loved. Another meaning for life has been established for the audience through the play’s Christian frame of reference, notably the sketching in of Duncan as a ‘most sainted’ monarch (IV.iii.109), and the account of Edward the Confessor, both showing up the image of the ‘poor player’ as reductive against a proper sense of the purpose and value of using time to a good end, against fulfilment to be thought of in the terms in which Edward is described:

sundry blessings hang about his throne
That speak him full of grace.

(IV.iii.158-9)

The play ends, as it began, with a battle, in which Macbeth again confronts death as a warrior, killing young Siward before he is himself slain by Macduff. The last image of death is one Macbeth has not looked for, when his head is brought on, probably as in Holinshed's account, on a pole, recalling the armed head among the apparitions of IV.i, and the bloody head of Banquo's ghost. If Macbeth's head was brought on in this way at the Globe (a possibility hinted at in Macduff's lines at V.viii.25-6, ‘We'll have thee. ... Painted upon a pole’), it would have suggested the image of an executed criminal, like the heads mounted on London Bridge; this marks the devaluation of Macbeth for Malcolm and his allies from the powerful tyrant of Scotland into ‘this dead butcher’ (V.viii.69). It is the last irony of the play that Macbeth should himself become an image of death that no longer terrifies anyone. The audience knows more than Malcolm, however, having experienced with Macbeth all that has happened; Malcolm sees merely the death of a hated tyrant and usurper, which is
certainly what Macbeth has become for his own people. But this is to conceive Macbeth's ambitions on a basic and elementary level as merely concerned with power. What we have witnessed is something much more complex. If anyone embodies this cruder sense of ambition it is Lady Macbeth, whose one thought in the early scenes is to gain the crown for her husband.

The action of the play reveals how little Macbeth understands himself when he says ambition to leap into Duncan's seat is the only spur that pricks him on to murder. The phrase occurs in one of his great soliloquies which expresses an emotional turmoil rather than a grasp of issues. Here, as in his incantatory speeches in III.ii in relation to the murder of Banquo, his words express more than he understands, and the sense is so complicated that, as I have put it elsewhere, theatre audiences cannot fully comprehend what is being said:

in the theatre the rhetoric dominates over the sense, which permits only tortured glimpses into the dark recesses of Macbeth's state of mind, and establishes a mood in which, with Lady Macbeth, we marvel at his words; and the point of it all arguably is to bring home the extent to which Macbeth himself understands the force of what he says, but not the implications.

So, in Macbeth's soliloquy in I.vii, the final images are muddy and compressed, and reverberate with significances which can be teased out through pages of commentary;

    pity, like a naked new-born babe
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself,
And falls on th'other

(I.vii.21-8)

The sudden shifts from the 'babe' to cherubs 'horsed' on the winds, to tears flooding to 'drown', to another kind of horse in the spur-pricking intent, do not allow any clear grasp of Macbeth's meaning, and dramatically establish that he does not fully understand himself; his words and images convey the anguish of his tortured mind, and a sense of bewilderment.

Macbeth does not comprehend the reasons why he is drawn, in spite of his full consciousness of the 'deep damnation of his taking-off', to murder Duncan. If the spur were merely ambition for the crown, he could overcome it; he has in any case the prophecy of the Witches that he will be King. The play explores more profoundly the compulsion that drives him in the series of 'strange images of death' it presents. A warrior, accustomed to killing on the battlefield, Macbeth, to be fully a 'man' in this limited sense, is driven to face the challenge of killings of a different kind, and his inner drive, embodied in the air-drawn dagger that marshals him towards Duncan, overcomes for him his revulsion at the deed. It is reinforced by Lady Macbeth:

    Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire?

(I.vii.39-41)

Her desire is for the crown, but his is larger, the urge to fulfil himself, as we now say, and in pursuing this Macbeth appals by what he does, and excites admiration for his ability to meet such a challenge, for the sheer daring of it. In order to bring this across to an audience, Macbeth has to be established as a rugged fighter, whose world is that of slaughter, as opposed to the saintly, gentle Duncan, whose world is that of the court.
Macbeth is young as imagined in the play, as Duncan's lines show:

I have begun to plant thee, and will labour
To make thee full of growing;

(I. iv. 28-9)

but Macbeth has begun as a killer, and his growth and fulfilment lie in confronting further and more terrible images of death. The play reveals, of course, the price Macbeth pays in achieving his desire, and exposes too the inadequacies of self-fulfilment as a goal; and yet there remains a sympathy for the tough and indomitable figure who ends in a hell of his own creating. The ‘great intellect’ of the play is Shakespeare's, realising dramatically through the magnificent compressed poetry given to Macbeth the inner impulses that he does not fully understand, but which drive him to overcome his scruples and fulfil himself in terms of what he is good at, killing. So finally Macbeth is a play that escapes from ordinary moral boundaries and judgments; it is less about a criminal who must be morally condemned than about a great warrior who breaks through the fear-barrier only to find on the other side not the release and fulfilment he looks for, but a desert of spiritual desolation.

In this way Shakespeare adds a new dimension to the theme of the ambitious prince finally brought low. He had earlier shown an awareness of the mixture of emotions and motives that could be involved in ambition, as, for instance, in his treatment of Caesar and Brutus in Julius Caesar. He understood the contradictory viewpoints which might make ambition appear sinful, foul, pitiful or thriftless, on the one hand, and ‘divine’ (Hamlet, IV. iv. 49) on the other, as Macbeth himself begins from ‘the big wars That makes ambition virtue’ (Othello, III. iii. 353-4). In Macbeth he went further. To start with he brilliantly dramatised that state of the man seized by ambition, ‘a proud covetousness, or a dry thirst of honour, a great torture of the mind’, as Burton was later to define it. In coveting the throne, and plotting the death of Duncan, Macbeth is like those Burton describes as ‘seeking that, many times, which they had much better be without; … with what waking nights, painful hours, anxious thoughts, and bitterness of mind, inter spem metumque [i.e., between hope and fear], distracted and tired, they consume the interim of their time.’ Burton's analysis, however, was confined to the perpetually unsatisfied aspirers, always seeking to rise, and swelling in the end until they burst or ‘break their own necks.’ 22 Macbeth achieves his aspirations, gains the throne, all at one throw, or so it seems when he kills Duncan, before the end of Act II; but Shakespeare's concern was to probe further in the last three acts into what happens then, into the way he becomes a prisoner of his own imagination, bound into doubts and fears, and is able to achieve release from these only at the appalling cost of losing his capacity to care. In daring to do all that may become a man, he destroys the best part of himself; and in showing the process by which Macbeth comes to realise this, Shakespeare makes his most searching analysis of the effects of ambition.

Notes

   Proser is interested in the inadequacy of such a comment to explain Macbeth's deeds, and he too finds the centre of the play's complexity in Macbeth himself, emphasising the manliness required of the soldier-hero, and describing the action in terms of a conflict between conscience and desire; for him Macbeth moves 'toward enacting without moral reservation—the ethic of pure desire' (p. 74).
6. *The Wheel of Fire* (1930), pp. 171–2. In his fine account of *Macbeth*, relating it to Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Wilbur Sanders takes off from Abercrombie and Wilson Knight in trying to ‘avoid separating the act of judgment which sees through Macbeth, from the act of imagination which sees the world *with* him’, and finds, in the courage and honesty of his bearing in facing ‘the realities of his situation’ at the end, an important positive element, in a ‘tremulous equilibrium between affirmation and despair’; see *The Dramatist and the Received Idea* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 299–307.


10. Richard David, *Shakespeare in the Theatre* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 95; David, in contrast to Abercrombie, Proser, Wilson Knight and Sanders, thinks that after the early part of the play ‘there is little for Macbeth to do but decline’ (p. 92), and praises Laurence Olivier's performance in the part for the sense it conveyed of ‘enormous undeveloped capabilities’, as opposed to Ian McKellen's playing of it, which did nothing of the kind.


12. John Russell Brown, in *Shakespeare's Dramatic Style* (1970), pp. 162–9, has a full and interesting analysis of this speech emphasising especially the function of the antitheses in it in showing Macbeth losing ‘his present bearings, and the ability to act’.


15. *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor, 2 vols (1930; revised 1960), II.221 (a lecture of 1813), and I.65 (notes made for a lecture given in 1819).

16. Coleridge noted that Lady Macbeth showed ‘No womanly, no wifely joy at the return of her husband’ (*Shakespearean Criticism*, I.65).


18. While this is, I think, true, it could be misinterpreted as an over-simplification; it needs to be said that at the point when we realise the extent of her complicity in the deed, in laying ready the daggers of the grooms, she shows a moment's vulnerability:

> Had he not resembled  
> My father as he slept, I had done't

(II.ii.12-13)

Although she can abstractly talk of dashing out the brains of her own babe (I.vii.58), when faced with such a deed she cannot bring herself to do it. Her mettle is not so ‘undaunted’ as she leads Macbeth to suppose.


We cours'd him at the heels, and had a purpose
To be his purveyor; but he rides well;
And his great love, sharp as his spur, hath holp him
To his home before us. Fair and noble hostess,
We are your guest tonight.

(I, 6,20-25)

This speech of Duncan's occurs some half-dozen lines before Macbeth's great "pity" soliloquy. It is of negligible interest except for the word spur which is conspicuously repeated thirty-three lines later by Macbeth ("I have no spur ....", etc.). It is impossible to say whether Shakespeare wrote the speech before or after the soliloquy, but the proximity of the two spurs suggests that one owes something to the other. But what? The simplest explanation is that Shakespeare already had the soliloquy in mind, or at least the equestrian motif in it, and was anticipating the appearance of Macbeth's metaphysical horses by planting his real horse as a vaunt-courier. Needing some sort of ironical underpinning for Duncan's fatal entrance into this "pleasant" castle, he fell upon the theme of Macbeth's speed in getting home to prepare his guest's welcome, and for good measure, spur offered a sharp means of condensing the hidden opposition between Macbeth's "false face" and his "false heart."

But it is just as possible that spur was in fact conceived as an innocent simile before the idea of the soliloquy had taken shape—that it somehow pricked Shakespeare's imagination and unconsciously led him to unfold his soliloquy around an act of horsemanship. In other words, the momentum of Macbeth's race home to plan the crime spills over into his second thoughts about it, vaulting him into the sky across the bank and shoal of time to the Day of Judgment itself.

Of course, if we look further into the Duncan scene we find other seeds for the soliloquy: teach, heaven's breath, twice done, then done double, deep and broad, and (earlier in the play) words like wind, success, catch, o'erleap, and sightless, all of which reappear prominently in Macbeth's vision and give it the extraordinary sense of being the ripe fruit of early plantings. But it is spur, I think, that gets Shakespeare off the ground and my preference for the second hypothesis—that the word inspired the form the soliloquy was to take—rests in a feeling that this is one of those curious places where we see an image breaking, by stages, out of what we might describe as a point of least resistance. Altogether, it has an effect a little like Empson's fifth-type ambiguity in which the poet seems to be discovering his idea in the act of writing, though I don't think we are dealing with an idea here as much as with a kind of energy or agitation that has been working in the play, in other forms, all along. The horses don't actually appear until the soliloquy is almost over, but we are potentially in horse country with "trammel up the consequence" (1, 3) and certainly with "jump" at line 7. Most editors read jump as meaning risk, and this is a valid interpretation. But jump also means jump, as in "jumping o'er times," in which case Macbeth is not simply risking the life to come but actively challenging it, as a horseman might challenge a hedge or (in this case) a body of water. I suspect that editors prefer jump as risk to jump as leap because it is difficult to make sense of a leap in this context (where, either in or out of time, would Macbeth land?). But perhaps we can admit the possibility that jump works like a pun in allowing Shakespeare to do two different kinds of things with the same sound: if it means risk it mimics motion; it is a kind of forked word, its meaning going in one direction and its gesture, as Blackmur would say, in another.
There would be no reason to worry this question if nothing came of *jump* in the sense of leaping, but a great deal does. In fact, the explosive energy of the soliloquy, the sense of its blowing a whole cosmos of retribution at us, arises from this subtextual gestation of the horses and their sudden birth in the sky, along with the naked babe, at line 22. We hear them long before they come into view. In fact, from the opening beat of the triple “done” everything is galloping apace and the French term *enjambement* takes on an almost graphic meaning as all of this tumbles from Macbeth's mind. By the time we have multiplied the possibilities of *done, surcease, be-all and end-all, life to come, judgment, chalice, trumpet-tongu’d, angels, deep damnation, heaven's cherubins, blast, sightless couriers, and wind,* and the fact that the vision is unfolding in the vault of heaven on the far side of time, we have good cause to see not only what Macbeth tells us was there—the cherubins and the figure of Pity—but what Macduff sees when the murder is discovered:

The great doom's image!

up, up, and see

(II, 3, 76-77)

The winds are the winds of the last day and the horses are four in number.

I am not interested in defending the idea that there *is* a vision of apocalypse here, intentionally or otherwise. But I am curious about what it is in the passage, and in the play at large, that makes me (and other readers) yield to the suggestion that there is. It is not so much any actual image of apocalypse that concerns me as the subtextual drive that throws the play in this final direction. One manifestation of this drive is the horse imagery, and if *spur* helped in the creation of the horse motif in the “pity” soliloquy, it was itself a symptom of a fury in the text that brought on many other such images of speeding, outrunning and leaping both before and after the murder. It might be argued that such an emphasis is to be expected in a play about such an urgent subject, but I think these images belong to the play in a more special way. Apocalyptic imagery is not on Macbeth's mind (or on Shakespeare's) in the hyperbolic way that the hurricane is on Lear's or death on Hamlet's, or in the sense that Shakespeare's people are always calling down the heavens. That is, it is not an *analogous* image that reflects the hero's state of mind onto nature so that we can see its emotional size. It is rather the state of mind itself, a particular physiognomy of consciousness (to use Lukacs' term) that belongs more properly to the sphere of motivation than to the sphere of metaphorical convention.

To come to my point in dwelling on the “pity” soliloquy, I wonder if, as the very pattern of Macbeth's “leaping” sickness, we might treat the speech as a motive for committing the murder rather than as a motive for *not* committing it. In light of the facts, this seems absurd. Macbeth is clearly so terrified by his vision that he vows to “proceed no further in this business,” and it is only through the intervention of Lady Macbeth that he is brought back on course. But somehow it seems trivial to say that Macbeth was talked into the murder by his wife. If one reads the play pathologically, as a bonding of deed and doer, one is led to ask if Macbeth could have done otherwise without radically modifying his nature. Did this rejection of the murder actually contain a rejection, or was it simply another oscillation in Macbeth's “restless ecstasy”? Could Macbeth, of all people, have *sustained* a state of conviction that the murder was inadvisable on moral and spiritual grounds? All of this opens onto the question of Macbeth's motive in killing Duncan and, more broadly, onto the question of motive itself as Shakespeare treats it in this and other tragic plays. I want to suggest, eventually, that the psychological complexity of Macbeth arises in great part from a peculiar relationship between the thing we call motive and the thing we call character. But first it is necessary to pursue the apocalyptic theme as it emerges in Macbeth's action and thought. To this end it would be useful to adopt a psychoanalytic approach since we are concerned primarily with the translation of symptoms into their determinants.

Let us look first at Macbeth as a successful warrior as viewed from the outside. Here our best source is the report of the wounded captain which serves the function of an overture to Macbeth's character. Here we see Macbeth for the first time, at second hand and necessarily speechless, wading (“hors'd,” I suggest) through a
sea of mutilated men. Here is Macbeth, one might say, thinking with his sword—that is, not thinking at all but living the “single state” in which a man is perfectly at peace in the simplicity of war. Here, where head and hand come together in the warrior's trade, Macbeth is himself. Hence the emphasis on killing as work. There is nothing clever about the way Macbeth wades war. The enemy is an obstruction that stands in his way, and you can almost imagine one of those outrageous Homeric similes of the warrior, “like the farmer with brandished scythe,” cutting a swath through a field of men. Above all, within this unperturbed killing machine we see the thorough man, carving out his passage:

Till he fac'd the slave;
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th'chops,
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

(I, 2,20-23)

Insofar as Macbeth is the tragedy of a great warrior gone wrong, this is the basis of his success. We must note, of course, that Macbeth is attended by Banquo, “no less” deserving, who carves at his side, though one is inclined to overlook this detail in the heat of Macbeth's wake. In any case, for these “strange images of death” it is Macbeth who is promoted, and we are left with little doubt that Macbeth's behavior coincides perfectly with the ideals of this society—brave Macbeth, well he deserves that name! The only possibly problematic passage in the scene:

Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds,
Or memorize another Golgotha,
I cannot tell—

(I, 20,40-42)

could easily be taken as a last, lavish hyperbole for the super warrior at his proper work. Its sense, a kind of praise by faint damnation, might be rendered: “So dedicated were they to our cause that an unknowing witness might think they had been unleashed out of Hell.”

But if we re-view the scene from an interior perspective, our picture changes radically. Reading psychoanalytically—that is, reading the play backwards—are we not entitled to see Macbeth's success in the field, however “brave” in the description, as the locus of an overdetermination in behavior? Following Freud, one could argue that we have a symptom rising from two different psychical systems: killing on the field is good, killing off the field is bad; one is encouraged, the other is prohibited and consequently suppressed. And when this coincidence of motive occurs in a single situation, as Freud says, the suppression releases itself through the door of the legitimate cause, a little as the Greeks got through the gates of Troy in the belly of a peace offering. Thus Macbeth's conduct on the field is “qualitatively justified but quantitatively excessive.”

Of course we now have the problem of accounting for Banquo who, in these same terms, is just as excessive as Macbeth. But perhaps we can diminish the problem on two counts: first, there is no reason to assume that identical behavior implies identical determinants and Banquo is, in the end, proven innocent of serious excessiveness (there is no “inside” to Banquo's “outside”); and second, it is possible that Shakespeare, given his murky handling of the whole issue of the murder's origin, may have wanted to blur any clear picture of Macbeth at this early stage and seized upon Banquo as a way of concealing (and indirectly deepening) Macbeth's motive by putting the wolf, so to speak, in the company of the sheep.

These opposed views, from the outside and the inside, represent possible extremes of interpretation; they should be thought of as a kind of parenthesis which encloses the site of a mystery that is no clearer than the mystery of whether Macbeth had even thought about murdering Duncan before his “day of success.” Neither is right or wrong, or only right or wrong. Their relationship is one of compatible contradiction within which
we might locate any number of determinants or combinations of determinants. If one wishes to read *Macbeth* as a tragedy of vaulting ambition, this “overcharg’d” behavior could be thought of either as Macbeth's last act of bravery or his first act of treachery; in the latter case it becomes an act of substitution and an unconscious rehearsal of the murder of Duncan. But it is just as possible that Macbeth's excessiveness in battle has nothing at all to do with the murder of Duncan but is, rather, the temperamental antecedent that will eventually supply the momentum for such a murder when the battle's won, Macbeth is promoted, impediments are again put in his “way,” and the Witches' charm is “wound up.” In other words, the slaughter of the Norweyans and the murder of Duncan are quantitatively interchangeable in that both are expressions of the same energy. Such a reading would not eliminate ambition as a cause, but it would complicate it: it would require that we see ambition as a drive without a single objective, or possibly even a drive *in search of* an objective. There is not an ounce of proof for such an idea but, as so often in *Macbeth*, there are odd resonances in the imagery that are never quite resolved as themes. For example, here and there, one gets glimpses of a “primitive” world,

Ere humane statute purg'd the gentle weal,

(III, 4, 74-75)

ea world of raw instinct, “secret'st” blood and “bare-faced power” that has been interiorized,” as Nietzsche says in *The Genealogy of Morals*, or “cooped up” within the polity—until it bursts forth (again, if we consult Holinshed) in the coming of Macbeth. In fact, in the context of *The Genealogy, Macbeth* could be read as the re-emergence of Nietzsche's “beast of action” in the company of guilt and bad conscience brought on by “that most brilliant stroke of Christianity: God's sacrifice of himself for man.” Of course this is a heresy no one would wish on Shakespeare; but the hellhound and the crucified savior draw strangely close in *Macbeth*. Once we grant that the excesses of the later Macbeth are prefigured in the imagery of the battle scene—that bravery and blackness are but a “statute” apart—it is not so easy to explain the line:

    bathe in reeking wounds,
Or memorize another Golgotha,

(I, 2,39-40)

as a flattering hyperbole. It is hard to know what, or how much, to make of this passage. Editors tend either to ignore *Golgotha* or to gloss it as “the hill of skulls,” which is etymologically correct but rather like glossing Buchenwald as a forest of beech trees. And “bathe in reeking wounds” (which belongs to a whole subsystem of images having to do with water, oceans and seas, swallowing up navigation, and crossing over, or through a body of water whose element is alternately conflated with blood and time) implies, in the light of all that follows, an act of pure will—not the will to power but the will, as Nietzsche puts it, to “poison the very foundation of things.” It is the egg of Malcolm's hatched beast at the other end of the play who would, if he had the power,

    Pour the sweet milk of concord into Hell,
    Uproar the universal peace, confound
    All unity on earth. ...

(IV, 3, 98-100)

and this, of course, is only Macbeth carried to his hypothetical absolute.

My suggestion is that “bathe in reeking wounds, / Or memorize another Golgotha” is best conceived as a symbolic *terminus ad quem* of the Macbeth energy. We are not meant to insist on the letter of the images but on their spirit and extremity. “I cannot tell,” the Captain concludes: it may have been one or the other—that is,
it was both and more, if words could piece it out, for there is a sense in which extreme images are always unsuccessful attempts to reach extremes. The point would be that both are unearthly motives; they have nothing to do with practical killing or with killing in anger or killing for a cause. Both belong to the category I am calling apocalyptic, partly because the holocaust was somehow on Shakespeare's mind as an extension of Duncan's murder, but mainly because as the agent of this theme he drew the portrait of an apocalyptic personality: a man obsessed by finality, by absolutes, and by his bondage to time. And it remains now to see how Macbeth's battlefield conduct and his career in blood are a prolongation of his mind's way of conceiving the world.

The distinctive quality of Macbeth's mind is the rapidity with which he leaps from extreme to extreme, leaving out, so to speak, the middle of thought. Even when he seems to be thinking in analytical stages—as in the “pity” soliloquy—one has the impression that he is catching up with something his imagination already knows and has planted in the form of a premature image (as, for example, when “trammel” matures into “sightless couriers”). One might almost describe Macbeth's mind as bicameral in the sense that he seems to be taking directions from another self or listening to his own nether-thought, as if in amazement that such things could have come out of him. In fact, my sense of the importance of the horse imagery, as a symbol of Macbeth's passion, is precisely consistent with Freud's idea that the relation of the ego to the id is like that of a man on horseback who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse. Often, however, the horse takes the bit and carries the rider where it wants to go, in which case the ego has no choice but to transform “the id's will into action as if it were its own.” This sense of a struggle between two parts of the mind is especially apparent in the “Two truths are told” soliloquy (I, 3, 127-142) in which Macbeth's “ego” debates the extremes—“This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill; cannot be good:”—while his “id” is already committing the murder. But the basic structure of the speech is that of a set of escalating antitheses in which one term swallows the other and produces a new antithesis. First, ill versus good; then if ill, why good? then if good, why ill? Abruptly present fears give way to horrible imaginings, function is smothered in surmise, and nothing is but what is not. Within a dozen lines, as fast as thought, Macbeth is inhabiting the future.

So antithesis, for Macbeth, is not an orderly dialectical process that resolves itself in a synthesis of thought (as in Hamlet's “Thus conscience …”). It is an invasion of thought by the imagination which is continually spinning new images out of old fabric. Every conclusion is instantly inadequate: nothing is but what is not. It is this restless production of new images that brings on the condition of trance (“Look how our partner's rapp'd”) and the sense of Macbeth's having been plunged into the fantastical world he has involuntarily created, much as the dreamer may be said to be plunged fully into the world unfolding in his own head. In fact, Macbeth's thought process is much like the processing of images in the dream-work where, as Freud suggests, antithesis, or contradiction, is a major strategy that may serve the ends of censorship or wish fulfillment. What we see, finally, is a mind stretched on the rack of its own constructions: the contradiction is synthesized in the emotion, or in the commotion in the mind. In short, to have one such antithesis—as in not being able to make up one's mind about something (“To be, or not to be”—is one thing; to be continually making antitheses, as a persistent structure of thought, is another. It is the torture, and possibly the thrill, of being (as Freud would say) a halfway house between actuality and possibility—an extratemporal being of sorts.

Another persistent characteristic of the dream is that the dreamer's consciousness, lacking the brake provided by the waking world, is continually spurred on to seize and transform its own images, bringing them to a fatal perfection. This phantasmagoric quality emerges most spectacularly in the “pity” soliloquy, which might have been painted by Salvador Dalí. It was Caroline Spurgeon who noticed the running pattern in the play's imagery of “the reverberation of sound echoing over vast regions, even into the limitless spaces beyond the confines of the world.” She offers only four examples from the play (two from the “pity” soliloquy), but she was looking primarily for images of reverberation rather than listening to the reverberation of images. If one looks closely at the evolution of the speech, her thesis is far better than her evidence suggests. For each image,
by virtue of Macbeth's peculiar trick of mind, amends the previous image, and the direction of the amendment is always toward the more "limitless" implication. For example, the knife blow (1. 4) that will give Duncan his surcease is converted eventually into the horse / winds that blow the horrid deed in every eye. Life to come is initially intended by Macbeth to refer to the immediate aftermath of the crime, but once the trumpet-tongu'd angels enter the vision, that intention becomes obsolete, or at least secondary. Judgment here initially refers to Macbeth's fear of a bloody counteraction among the thanes, but here, in itself, converts it into a dialectical term that implicitly contains judgment beyond. Moreover, the surcease/success pairing not only converts to its opposite, the deep damnation of the life to come, but it reveals Macbeth's hoped-for success as standing under the aspect of eternity: what he imagines as a be-all and an end-all here is graduated to the end-all, or surcease, of time itself. In other words, present fears and hopes continually "echo" as terminal imaginings and the equivocation by which the fiends entrap Macbeth turns out to be the subconscious property of his own imagination. For there is, overall, a riddling quality in the soliloquy, if we think of the riddle as a puzzle that openly hides its torqued meanings in its own terms. The master equivocation, of course, is that in equating his murder with time—that is, a single and last murder, a murder that will murder time—it gets confused with its eschatological replica. Murder and universal atonement draw together in a relationship that is partly synecdochic and partly paradoxical—paradoxical because, as the final torque, there is the extraordinary closing image—"I have no spur,"—in which Macbeth replaces the cherubins with his own hors'd figure, riding in the sky with his smoking steel. One might argue that Shakespeare was simply keeping his horse image alive in the interest of poetic symmetry, that he didn't really mean to put Macbeth up there; however, there he is, on horseback again, the sense in the words having him stumble and fall to earth while the poetry vaults him into the heavens "beyond the confines of the world." Here, if anywhere, Macbeth is in the predicament of Freud's poor ego trying to serve three masters at once: "driven by the id, confined by the super-ego, repulsed by reality, [the ego] struggles to master its economic task of bringing about harmony among the forces and influences in and upon it."  

What this speech evokes, for me, is not a specific, subconscious motive but the sense of a man whose visions drive him relentlessly past his purposes and his hesitations. It is the nature of Macbeth's mind, not his earthly needs, that requires the murder, and continues to require murder as a new potentiation of self and will, a new sense of abridging the intolerable distance between head and hand. This aspect of Macbeth's momentum was beautifully understood by Kierkegaard who resorted to the play twice (and most pertinently to the line, "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill") in his treatise on "Continuation in Sin" in The Sickness Unto Death. There are, on one hand, Kierkegaard says, ordinary men who "take a hand in the game of life as it were, but they never have the experience of staking all upon one throw, never attain the conception of an infinite self-consistency." They always talk about "the particular, particular deeds, particular sins." On the other hand, there are the men who exist under "the rubric of spirit" for whom consistency of self is the essential gyroscope. For them, "the least inconsistency is a prodigious loss for with that in fact a man loses consistency." Macbeth, he implies, is such a man, for the spiritual existence may be lived either by a believer or a demoniac, and:

as with the believer, so it is also with his counterpart, the demoniac man. … Only in the continuation of sin he is himself, only in that does he live and have an impression of himself. What does this mean? It means that the state of being in sin is that which, in the depth to which he has sunk, holds him together, impiously strengthening him by consistency; it is not the particular new sin which (crazy as it sounds to say it) helps him, but the particular new sin is merely the expression for the state of being in sin which properly is the sin … ; in the particular new sins the momentum of sin merely becomes more observable.

(pp. 239, 237)

I should say that this is not intended as an interpretation of Macbeth's career in crime. In Macbeth, Kierkegaard simply found the illustrative text for the momentum of sin, the sinner's loss of existential security,
his need to “hold himself together” in new sin as a way of reifying his lost “single state.” It is a moot point as to whether sin is even the issue in Macbeth. But I think Kierkegaard’s intuition is right: that Macbeth’s “sin” should not be considered motivationally as a series of particular sins, each owing to some new cause (though he himself gives new reasons for each new sin: “My fears in Banquo stick deep,” etc.), but rather as a spiritual state that requires an infinite self-consistency, that possesses an infinite capacity for fear and an infinite sense of consequence and loss. “The more excellent the machine,” Kierkegaard says, “all the more frightful … the confusion.”

In less sinful terms, apocalyptic movement, as I have been tracing it here, is the movement toward nothingness or all-at-onceness, which in Macbeth's case is the time-hidden reverse side of “success” (equated by Macbeth with “surcease”). Thus Macbeth's career in crime is an attempt to finish off what was begun with the murder of Duncan whom he had brought to a saintly perfection in the tapestry of his vision; or, as Shakespeare puts it in The Rape of Lucrece, it is an attempt to “make something nothing by augmenting it” (1. 154). Murder is both a something and a nothing; that is, it is an act and a negation, with the side effect of the murderer's moral suicide. Murder is teleological. What happens after murder is that the neutrality of the world is cancelled; the world now bristles with “prating” signs, as in a dream—which is to say that the world becomes both witness and nemesis. There is no turning back and all going ahead is iteration because time is now permanently reallocated as the zone of “consequence.” Renown and grade are dead, and all the finite categories of honor, love, obedience, and troops of friends are extinguished forever.

My case for the apocalyptic theme rests here. But by way of a theoretical postscript, I want to turn now to a consideration of Macbeth as a symptom of its creator's method. Our question might be: what, apart from the citation of passages taken out of context, is the textual justification for such a reading? How does the apocalyptic theme arise from a text that has not quite proclaimed it openly, or at least as openly as Hamlet proclaims the theme of death or King Lear the themes of love and duplicity? Or even: is it possible to misread a text without falsifying it, on the theory that certain texts, being more algebraic than arithmetic, invite misreadings because they cast anagogic shadows beyond their local meanings? If so, what makes such a text algebraic? Let me begin with an observation that is commonly made of the play:

What is distinctly absent in Macbeth is a public element in its hero's life. Shakespeare gave him no scenes of friendship or intimacy (except with his confederate, Lady Macbeth), no political scenes, and—most important—no behavioral range; hence, no visible potential, in the eventuality of “success,” to enjoy the fruits of power, as Claudius does, once he has them. Here we encounter the well-known lacuna between Macbeth's motive and his behavior that formed the basis of E. E. Stoll's argument with Robert Bridges and J. I. M. Stewart's with Stoll. That is: there is a gap between the facts the play asks us to assume (Macbeth kills to obtain the crown and continues to kill in order to protect it) and the subjective drama the play sets before us. I am not suggesting that ambition is therefore invalid as a motive, simply that it is treated as a fact rather than a passion, and we must now try to see what the consequence of this treatment is.

We normally think of motive as the most direct subjective cause of an act. It is the word (hatred, ambition, jealousy) taken from the book of human passions that explains the act, or at least enables us to put it to rest in the causal order. But of course motive itself originates in character, or disposition, and it follows that having found the motive for an act we become amateur biographers and seek the motive for this motive in the wider province of character. One always wants to know what kind of person was motivated to commit the act. For example, I read in my encyclopedia that John Wilkes Booth was a “charming egomaniac” and “an ardent confederate sympathizer.” Here we have the essential ingredients of a biography: the former belongs to the sphere of character—something Booth was, something that led (among countless other things) to a career on the American stage; the latter belongs to the sphere of motive—something Booth wanted, and an act, as Sartre points out, always rises out of a desire to change the shape of the world in some degree.9 Even though we cannot keep the actor / egomaniac out of the Ford Theatre on the evening of April 14, 1865—even though someone in the theatre might cry out, “Some maniac has shot the President!”—we would not be apt to
attribute Booth's motive in killing Lincoln to egomania. The most we could say is that character may assume a conical shape with motive as the point, among many in a lifetime, at which it refines itself into a concern, and thence into an act.

My point is that if Shakespeare were telling the story of Booth's assassination of Lincoln, he would have given us a play about charming egomania rather than one about ardent sympathy for the confederate cause. Of course, he would probably have altered the nature of Booth's mania and charm to suit his own purposes, but he would certainly have shifted the emphasis from the “nearest” cause (as expressed in Booth's cry, “Sic semper tyrannis! The South is avenged!”) to the characterological foundation on which it is formed. This is Shakespeare's habit, at least with respect to his major tragic figures: having inherited, say, jealousy or ambition as the primary causal factor of the fiction he has chosen to adapt to the stage, he ignores it as a passion or an appetite—he states it openly (“I have no spur … but vaulting ambition …,” or “O, beware the green-eyed monster” or “Remember thee? Ay, thou poor ghost. …”), thereby giving it validity on conventional de casibus grounds (sins, like virtues, are self-explanatory categories of motivation); then he finds a more interesting “motive” in the very construction and potency of the hero's personality to which the stated motive stands in a decoy and, in part, inimical relationship. It is a form of characterization almost directly opposite that of the humourist (Johnson and Molière, for example) who scrupulously avoids any departure from the appetite: greed and lust have no auxiliary or interior features—they are precisely what we see. To the humourist, motive and character are virtually identical.

I am thinking of something a good deal more specific than the commonplace that Shakespeare's heroes have depth of character, though the method (if we can call it that) certainly contributes to the effect of depth. But the true complexity of his heroes does not arise from a rich variety of traits or a “well-rounded” character but from his way of converting the motive supplied by his source into a form of reactionary intelligence. And this technique has at least two important consequences for the reader or viewer of the play. First, it is through this dramatic displacement of motive by nature—by the intensity of a nature, let us say—that we derive the impression of a “deep” subconscious filled with instincts, repressions, and infra-motives. In effect, there is a gap between motive and intensity: the two forces neither coincide nor are they completely incompatible. This gap serves a poetic function similar to that of the mind's preconscious screen where the work of censorship and displacement takes place, in Freudian psychology. It is here that we find the greatest lure to a psychoanalytic reading of character. For psychology is essentially a science of motives, and because Shakespeare's play contains so little psychology (in this sense) it becomes endlessly psychological in its appeal. To illustrate: Hamlet suspects that Claudius has murdered his father and sets up the play in which the murder will be imitated. The reaction is (predictably) a guilty one, and Claudius sweeps out in a frenzy. Yet Hamlet does not act on this almost certain proof. Instead, he becomes highly excitable to the point of doing violence to others. It is not that his behavior is inconsistent (Hamlet is being his old self) but that the causal connection is not articulated in language: the text has become algebraic in the sense of having produced (or having maintained) an unknown whose value is to be determined from the known quantities in the play, as one chooses to see them. Here we enter the deep thicket of repression, displacement, and the like, and one can get out of it by any number of hermeneutical paths—or, one can simply marvel at the truth in Hamlet's mystery without trying to pluck it out.

So it is with Macbeth—in reverse: the energy, the killing, are there, but the motive is weakly stated. Think how many of Macbeth's lines—for example: “Strange things I have in head, that will to hand, which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd” (III, 4,38-39)—elude the whole province of self-explanation. What they leave us with is the verbal residue of an unspeakable motive that is, as Freud would insist, inadmissible to the consciousness. What can these “strange things” signal if not the death of motive, conceived of as the reasons the mind offers itself, and the emergence of something like brute will, or instinct, which is, as Freud says, “a certain quota of energy which presses in a particular direction.” It is interesting that Freud himself, who could easily see the murder of Duncan as “little else than parricide,” was so baffled at this stage of Macbeth's “unbridled” tyranny that he renounced any hope of “penetrating the triple layer of obscurity” of the play.
But Freud's, I suspect, is a special case of disappointment that the play did not finally live up to a preferred “deep” reading (“the motive of childlessness”), and this apparently blinded him to other possible (even Freudian) readings that could be supported by dozens of texts, beginning with the literature of the demonic.

There is a second and equally important consequence of this method of characterization. It is through this relative freedom from motive and appetite—freedom from a logic of determinism, if you will—that Shakespeare's heroes are sprung free of the earth: free to contemplate the symbolism of their acts, free to convert all of the relatives of their particular “cases” into absolutes. In this connection, it is worth noting how frequently Shakespeare selects plots that contain, or can be made to contain, a powerful agency of external persuasion. Unlike Marlowe's heroes of the massive appetite, who seem to be born with motives in full flight, Shakespeare's tend, on the whole, to have motives thrust upon them. Metaphysical forces like the Witches, the ghost of King Hamlet, and (in a more earthly way) Iago, whatever other functions they perform, serve dramaturgically to take at least some of the causal burden onto themselves, leaving the hero not only with a partial mandate for action but an overcharg'd soul as well. For there is always a lightninglike speed in the way these forces “rap” the hero and ionize his world into a metaphysical field. And here we may note Shakespeare's habit of abruptly condensing the onset of his hero's fate into single lines which drop, like bane, into his life: “Ha! I like not that!” or “My lord, I think I saw him yesternight,” or “Nothing, my lord,” or “All hail, Macbeth! that shalt be King hereafter!” Such lines mark the entry of the hero into the ionized world: they are what Lukacs might call miracle moments in which the hero's “empirical” life leaves off and his “essential” or tragic life begins. Any sweet sleep that he “ow'dst yesterday” is gone, and reality becomes a projection of his overcharged imagination. Now the entire force of personality rushes into the opening made by the decoy motive. Character becomes a portable concentration of essence that applies itself to every new event in the hero's life; the prospect of the act, one might say, becomes the motive for his discourse with his Fate. Hence, Shakespeare's play, built upon the soaring pillars of the soliloquy, is, in Kierkegaard's term, a “dialectical lyric” in which the hero is driven continually to “go further,” like Heraclitus, ever moving to and fro in an insomnia of problemata. It matters little whether he is talking himself into his act or out of it. Everything flows toward the act, that foregone conclusion of the plot (thanks to which we have such a hero). It is only a question of the time required to purify the act (as Macbeth purifies Duncan) in the fire of his resistance. In this regard, Macbeth and Hamlet may be seen as fraternal agonizers between whom Shakespeare divides the ramifications of violent action: Hamlet gets the problematics of a good deed; Macbeth gets those of an evil deed. Even a speech as remote from vengeance as Hamlet's “What a piece of work is a man” is a preparation for the act; it all goes into the Hamlet dossier against the enemy (what went wrong with what was right) and constitutes a psychical step in Hamlet's unique movement toward the kill. Again, in the “deep” sense, one might say that Hamlet's vengeance is not in the least delayed but continually carried out against a complacent world that has, for example, produced such creatures as Claudius. And in an equally deep sense, as I have suggested here, Macbeth's ambition could be said to transcend its earthly and social manifestations (wanting this traitor's head, wanting this throne) and becomes a wholesale reaction to “the frame of things.” In short, if you extend the principle of ambition far enough, into ultimate spheres, you arrive at total “success,” whose synonyms are not kingship and power but surcease and end-all—a termination of longing for success.

This is only one possible reading, and I admit that it is made possible by modern doctrines of freedom that Shakespeare knew nothing about. But it is one of the enticements of Shakespeare's algebraic text, for better or worse, that it lures us into readings, or misreadings, of the kind that are less apt to arise with arithmetic texts in which the sum of meaning is not much altered by time. But to conclude: it is this unique relationship between motive and character that opens Shakespeare's play to such a remarkable degree, in one sense deepening it psychologically, in another expanding it metaphysically. In Macbeth these two dimensions are perfectly condensed in the symbol of the horse which haunts this play as the ghost of its motion, a nuance beautifully caught in Polanski's film version, by the way. Historically, there are two main aspects to the symbolism of the horse, and they are fused in Macbeth. The horse is, first, a symbol of psychical drive. We do not need Freud to validate this idea since he is only continuing a meaning that dates back at least to Plato's allegory of the charioteer. In all its attributes—speed, power, independence, wanton beauty—the horse
bespeaks the energy of instinct and libido, the fire of the will, the capacity of the soul to break its civil stall. But also, of all the earthbound animals, it is the horse that we have endowed with wings. Put the horse against the sky and it becomes the emblem of the world's end: on it sit Death, War, Famine, and Plague. Now it confers riot on the world, as it does on the private soul of man. Thus in its mythic fury the horse defines two kinds of ominous space: interior and cosmic (just as in the history plays, where it is the obedient servant of warlike men, it defines the political space of the world). But in drama, where world is the creation of character, the distinction between these two kinds of space dissolves. Interior space, the unspeakable deep, is inverted: Macbeth's mind is spread out on the sky of his visions, and through the power of the image he becomes the contaminated soul of the world.

Notes

1. Since the soliloquy is a key text in my essay, I quote it in its entirety:

   If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
   It were done quickly: if th'assassination
   Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
   With his surcease success; that but this blow
   Might be the be-all and the end-all—here,
   But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
   We'd jump the life to come.—But in these cases,
   We still have judgment here; that we but teach
   Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
   To plague th'inventor: this even-handed Justice
   Commends th'ingredience of our poison'd chalice
   To our own lips. He's here in double trust:
   First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
   Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
   Who should against his murtherer shut the door,
   Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
   Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
   So clear in his great office, that his virtues
   Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against
   The deep damnation of his taking-off;
   And Pity, like a naked new-born babe,
   Striding the blast, or heaven's Cherubins, hors'd
   Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
   Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
   That tears shall drown the wind.—I have no spur
   To prick the sides of my intent, but only
   Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
   And falls on th'other—

   (I, 7, 1-28)

2. The word *success* occurs only four times in the play, twice in connection with Macbeth's victory over the Norweyans and twice in connection with the murder of Duncan, all four in Act I. So for a short time it becomes a relatively active word that attaches itself to both a public and a secret endeavor, both featuring Macbeth as a killer.


Criticism: Themes: Margaret Omberg (essay date 1996)


[In the following essay, Omberg contends that Macbeth's failure to produce an heir provides central thematic, structural, and psychological components to the tragedy of Macbeth.]

Ever since L. C. Knights held Bradley's interpretation of Shakespearean tragedy up to scorn in “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?” the very title of the essay has been associated with the kind of irrelevant speculation that should not be pursued by serious criticism. Perhaps as a result of the inspired irony of this title there has been an understandable reluctance to return to the question of the Macbeths' children, which, far from being an unwarranted speculation, is a highly relevant issue in the development of the plot and the destiny of the main characters in Macbeth. As far back as 1916 Freud suggested in one of his early psychological studies that childlessness lay at the root of the tragedy of Macbeth and his lady but it is not a theme that has been taken up to any great extent by later scholars. G. Wilson Knight was the first to direct attention to the failure of natural activities in the play and the numerous child-references it contains while Cleanth Brooks has discussed the image of the babe as one of Macbeth's most important symbols. More recently Marvin Rosenberg has argued that “all of Macbeth's violence is in the service of a son of his own” and dismisses the suggestion of Macbeth's childlessness as absurd. My purpose in the following pages is to show that Macbeth's lack of a son and heir is both a major theme of the play and the key to many of the hero's actions. Certain recurrent patterns in structure and imagery seem to bear out Freud's contention that Macbeth is childless, as does the more central question of the protagonist's psychological development.

Shakespeare found the historical basis of Macbeth in Holinshed's Chronicle of Scotland, and combined it with the story of Donwald from the same source to form the plot of the play. In addition he was almost certainly acquainted with George Buchanan's Rerum Scoticarum Historia and John Leslie's De Origine Scotorum, where great stress was laid on the unbroken succession of Stuart kings on the throne of Scotland. The interweaving of these various sources goes beyond the limits of this study but Bullough and R. A. Law have conclusively demonstrated that Shakespeare closely followed the Macbeth story in Holinshed's Scottish Chronicle for the structuring of the play's action. It is therefore particularly noteworthy when he departs from this outline, either to introduce information from another source or to add to the action from his own imagination.

A swift glance at the dramatis personae of Macbeth is enough to show us that all the notable male characters—with the exception of Macbeth himself—are fathers with sons who take an active part in the play. Duncan's Malcolm and Donalbain and Banquo's Fleance are to be found in the Chronicle of Scotland but Young Siward and Young Macduff do not appear here. The account of the death of Siward and his father's concern that he died honourably in battle occurs in Holinshed's Chronicle of England; while Young Macduff is Shakespeare's own creation. Holinshed simply states that Macduff had children: “Makbeth most cruelly caused the wife and children of Makduffe, with all other whom he found in that castell, to be slaine.”
There is no mention of a son here, in Buchanan or in Leslie. Young Macduff is therefore a new creation based on the reference to children in Holinshed and the events of the scene where he appears are largely Shakespeare's own invention. It is particularly interesting that on both of these occasions Shakespeare has gone beyond his main source to see that all the main characters, most importantly Macduff, have sons, as though he were determined to underline the fact that Macbeth does not have one.

The structure of the play shows Macbeth constantly coming up against one father/son combination after another. The importance of having an heir is heralded by the Weird Sisters who promise Macbeth the crown but Banquo the succession. In Holinshed the Sisters are even more explicit regarding Macbeth, telling him that “neither shall he leave anie issue behind him to succeed in his place” (Bullough, 495). For all the drama of the murder of Duncan, it is quickly accomplished and Macbeth then moves on to the problem of the prophecy to Banquo and the continuation of the royal line. At this point Banquo and Fleance take over the roles of Duncan and Malcolm as the major threat to Macbeth's ambitions but they quickly suffer the same fate as their predecessors: the father dies and the son escapes.

With the exit of Banquo and Fleance, Macduff moves into the position of chief adversary to Macbeth, seconded by the son Shakespeare has provided to sustain the father/son pattern. This interpretation is given added credence by the content of the scene in which the boy appears (IV.ii) and the conversation between Lady Macduff and her son about the absent father who has left his family unprotected. This interlude in the main action is usually explained as being Shakespeare's portrayal of the good and innocent in life, and the killing of Lady Macduff and her children as indicative of the depths to which Macbeth has all too quickly sunk, becoming a tyrant who butchers innocent women and children.

Yet the ruthlessness of these murders seems out of proportion to Macduff's offence or the threat he poses, particularly as he had no claim to the throne. Seen in the context of Macbeth's preoccupation with his own childlessness, however, his revenge on Macduff is more understandable and has been well prepared for during the first two scenes of Act IV.

In the first of these Macbeth returns to the Weird Sisters to hear what the future holds for him after the murder of Banquo and the flight of Fleance. As Brooks points out, the second and third apparitions he is shown take the form of children, foreshadowing Macbeth's most pressing need, which is to know if Banquo's issue will ever reign in Scotland. The answer is given in the form of a show of eight kings with Banquo indicating that they are his descendants. This sight draws from Macbeth the cry of despair, “What! will the line stretch out to th' crack of doom?” (IV.i.117). Immediately afterwards the Sisters vanish, and Lenox arrives to inform Macbeth that Macduff has fled to England. Macbeth's response is to order the deaths of Macduff's “wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line” (IV.i.152-3). The repetition of the word line, used to describe Banquo's royal progeny shortly before, is an indication that it is the despair and rage created by the show of kings which is unleashed on Macduff's family and kinsmen. The violence of this attack can thus be seen as having a direct connection to the blighting of Macbeth's hopes of founding a dynasty and the futile reprisal taken out on the offspring of his enemy is nothing less than the culmination of his frustration at his own barren stock.

This interpretation of Macbeth's motivation for the killing of Macduff's family integrates the painful scene where the abandoned Lady Macduff talks with her son more satisfactorily with the rest of the action. In addition to the fleeting glimpse of normal family life their conversation affords, it takes up the theme of fatherhood and the responsibilities it demands. Young Macduff is “father'd … and yet he's fatherless,” a line that refers both to the biological and social aspects of paternity; and Lady Macduff's repeated question, “How wilt thou do for a father?” underlines the importance of the father's protective role and the vulnerability of his offspring in his absence. Even at the very moment of young Macduff's cruel death, the biological bond is reflected in the coarse words of his murderer, “What, you egg! Young fry of treachery!” (IV.ii.82-3). The child is then murdered on stage, accentuating the priority of disposing of the heir, while Lady Macduff is killed off-stage. The excessive cruelty of murdering the child in front of his mother (and the audience) is a visual manifestation of Macbeth's uncontrollable fury at his own barrenness which will mean the extinction of
his own line.

With the harrowing death of Young Macduff still fresh in our minds, we are then transported to the English court to witness his father's attempt to persuade Malcolm to move against Macbeth. In Holinshed's account Macduff seeks out Malcolm as a result of the slaughter of his family, “… to trie what purchase hee might make by means of his support to revenge the slaughter so cruellie executed on his wife, his children, and other friends” (Bullough, 501). Shakespeare makes a significant change to this sequence of events by letting the murder take place during, and largely because of, Macduff's absence, but above all by leaving Macduff ignorant of the murder until he reaches Malcolm's court.11 Here he may well have taken a hint from the account of the same events in Buchanan where Macduff, forewarned of Macbeth's enmity, “commended the Care of his family to his Wife … passed over into Lothian … and from thence into England” (Bullough, 515).

Whatever the impulse, the gain in dramatic tension produced is immense. There is the obvious dramatic irony of Malcolm's suspicion of Macduff's motives, and his suggestion that only someone in league with Macbeth would have dared leave his family at his mercy. A new and terrible irony is produced when Ross enters to bring the news of the murders, providing the ultimate confirmation of Macduff's honesty when it is no longer needed. But the greatest gain produced by the new arrangement is the opportunity for the highly charged emotional second half of the scene where Macduff is given the news of the slaughter of his family. This section links back to the previous scene, now showing the father's grief and acceptance of his own guilt for what has happened to his wife and children. Manly action in the form of revenge is suggested by Malcolm as a palliative for sorrow; but for the first time in the play, the concept of manliness is given a wider implication by Macduff's insistence on the importance of feeling:

MAL.

Let's make us med'cines of our great revenge,

To cure this deadly grief.

MACD.

He has no children.—All my pretty ones?

Did you say all?—O Hell-kite!—All?

What, all my pretty chickens, and their dam,

At one fell swoop?

MAL.

Dispute it like a man.

MACD.

I shall do so;

But I must also feel it as a man:

I cannot but remember such things were,

That were most precious to me.—Did Heaven look on,
And would not take their part? Sinful Macduff!

They were all struck for thee.

(IV.iii.213-25)

On two occasions in the above dialogue the young Malcolm is rebuked by Macduff for his insistence on the “manly” virtues at the expense of natural feeling. The first instance is when his suggestion that grief be dealt with by converting it to revenge is dismissed by Macduff's comment to Rosse, “He has no children,” and the second when the injunction to “dispute it like a man” is met with the swift rejoinder, “I shall do so; / But I must also feel it like a man.” The second of these two examples has never been a point of critical conjecture, but the first has been explained in three different ways, depending on whom “he” is taken to signify. Kenneth Muir in the Arden edition of the play summarizes these different interpretations in a footnote to the line. The first of them takes “he” to refer to Malcolm, who, Macduff implies, would not suggest curing grief with revenge if he had any children of his own; the second takes “he” to refer to Macbeth, who either has no children to be killed in revenge; or, as in the third interpretation, would never have contemplated killing another man's children if he had known the joys of fatherhood himself (135).

Muir himself supports the second interpretation which would seem to be an unlikely choice in the light of Shakespeare's portrayal of Macduff in Act IV as a man of exceptional integrity whose sense of justice and morality is well balanced by strong feeling and natural sensitivity. Are we to believe that a child for a child would be such a man's mode of revenge? In Act V his sense of fair dealing is to be further underlined when he refuses to fight hired soldiers, seeing Macbeth—and only Macbeth—as a justifiable target. It is surely psychologically implausible that a man who recoils morally from striking hierlings should contemplate taking revenge on defenceless children. There is the possibility that the comment might refer to Macbeth if Macduff delivered it with heavy irony at Malcolm's expense, as though following through his suggestion to its logical end; but this surely goes against the emotional grain of the moment as Macduff tries to sustain the shock of his loss. The third explanation is unconvincingly sentimental in view of Macbeth's atrocities already discussed in the scene. This leaves us with the first alternative, where the “he” referred to is Malcolm, not Macbeth, which, as indicated above, seems to be the likeliest explanation. It is both dramatically and emotionally convincing, and the fact that Malcolm's callousness, or at least lack of understanding, is repeated and then directly challenged a few lines later strengthens the case for the first alternative on the grounds of contextual suitability.

I would further suggest that this moment, when the good Macduff is forced to come to terms with his deficiencies as a father and husband, and in so doing shows true humanity, is one of the main reasons for Shakespeare's reorganization of the historical events he found in Holinshed. By making Macduff receive the news of his family's deaths at this point Shakespeare not only raises the dramatic and emotional temperature of what is a fairly plodding scene (nowhere else in the play does Shakespeare follow the language of his source with more fidelity) but re-emphasizes the importance of family and children, an importance which Macduff endorses and will ultimately avenge.

Thus the structure of the play with its careful counterpointing of fathers and sons throwing Macbeth's lack of progeny into relief is one of the strongest reasons for dismissing the notion that Macbeth also has a son. To claim, however speculatively, as does Rosenberg, that a baby son exists, despite the fact that he never appears or is even mentioned specifically, flies in the face of the evidence of the text and simple common sense. On the contrary, Holinshed's line noting the witches prophecy that Macbeth would not “leave anie issue behind him” has been made one of the themes of the play, eating away the hero's hopes and ultimately isolating him from his wife as well as the world at large. Lady Macbeth may well have given suck but not to a living son of her husband, yet it is the terrible lines which picture her wrenching the child from her breast that have been taken as proof of the existence of a young Macbeth. For this reason they warrant closer examination.
The historical Lady Macbeth did indeed have a son, a simpleton known as Luthlac, described by Holinshed as “the sonne or (as some write) the cousin of the late mentioned Macbeth.” In The Royal Play of Macbeth Henry Paul states his belief that “Shakespeare had evidently found out that he [Luthlac] was really the son of Lady Macbeth by Gilcomgain her first husband; for in the play although Macbeth is childless, Lady Macbeth speaks of her child”. Rosenberg, on the other hand, agrees with Bradley that Shakespeare either ignored or was ignorant of this previous marriage as he tells us “unequivocally—in a play full of equivocation—that they [the Macbeths] have had a child”; Rosenberg then further suggests a staging of the play where the presence of a baby in a cradle would give an added dimension to the text (671ff). However, such deductions and speculations as these cannot be seriously entertained. Shakespeare does not tell us unequivocally or any other way that the Macbeths have had a child; he tells us that Lady Macbeth has had one, and does so indirectly in the lines beginning, “I have given suck” (I.vii.54). What is certain is that no child of Macbeth is present in a play which otherwise makes much of children as characters in the action and that the hero is haunted by the fact of his inability to produce an heir throughout.

For it is clear that from the moment the succession is promised to Banquo that Macbeth's desire for a son becomes a living reality. Several instances in the first act show that the thought of children is not far from his mind. He twice refers to the prophecy of Banquo's sons becoming kings (I.iii.86,118) and in his speech of loyalty to Duncan he somewhat strangely likens feudal duties to children (I.iv.25). A more significant example is the “naked, new-born babe” of his first great soliloquy, the strongest image in the apocalyptic vision that makes him draw back from the brink of murder (I.vii.21-25). His change of heart is derided by Lady Macbeth who sees it as a sign of weakness, claiming that she would rather tear the child from her breast and kill it than show such infirmity of purpose:

When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And, to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. Nor time, nor place,
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:
They have made themselves and that their fitness now
Does unmake you. I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.

(I.vii.49-59)

This is the climax of Lady Macbeth's attack on her husband and the brutality of the babe image conveys not only the strength of her own resolution but the virulence of the attack on his virility which has just preceded it. If Shakespeare was indeed aware that Lady Macbeth had a child by a previous husband, her taunting of Macbeth takes on an added edge, the stress on the pronoun “I” not just indicating the closer bond between mother and child but her own biological superiority. In other words, the accusation of barrenness cannot be laid at her door.

Having thus humiliated him sexually, she then offers him a way back into her good graces if he will rise to the challenge afforded by her plan to murder Duncan. It is not surprising that his moral scruples about killing the king are overcome, combined as they are with the opportunity of reinstating his masculinity. The evidence for this combination lies in his exclamation of admiration at his wife's audacity:

Bring forth men-children only!

For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males.
This is no general compliment to Lady Macbeth's particular brand of courage but a spontaneous cry of hope that she will bear him a son to succeed him once he has gained the crown. It shows that the question of the succession is already looming large in Macbeth's mind before the murder of Duncan.

After the murder it becomes his main concern to the point of obsession until the end of the play. The first time we meet him alone again is at the beginning of Act III where all the frustration he feels at his fate is poured out in the soliloquy "To be thus is nothing … " (III.i.47 ff). For although this speech opens with Macbeth's avowal that he both fears Banquo's knowledge of his actions and resents his noble nature and personal charisma, it does not really catch fire until halfway through. Then the real reason for his hatred—the succession—rises to the surface:

Upon my head they plac'd a fruitless crown,  
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,  
No son of mine succeeding. If't be so,  
For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind;  
For them the gracious Duncan have I murther'd;  
Put rancors in the vessel of my peace,  
Only for them; and mine eternal jewel  
Given to the common Enemy of man,  
To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings!  
Rather than so, come, fate, into the list,  
And champion me to th' utterance!

That the fact of Macbeth's lack of an heir sticks deeper than any fear of Banquo is indicated by some of the words used in the passage. Brooks notes that the plant imagery here builds on that already used by Banquo and Duncan as a symbol of growth and development; Wilson Knight sees the crown and sceptre as "barren in every sense; barren of joy and content, barren of posterity;" while Rosenberg insists that it is the crown that is barren, not Macbeth. But here again, are not the images of the "fruitless crown" and the "barren sceptre" more specific and personal? The sterility is Macbeth's and his wife's and his latent frustration and fury at this condition builds up to erupt in the line, "To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings!" (my italics). The choice of the word seed when sons would have been a more normal alternative is telling. It reveals the biological bent of Macbeth's thoughts as he sees life reduced to its most basic elements, and the power of the word lies in its contrast to the images of infertility that precede it as well as in the dehumanizing ring of contempt it conveys.

Macbeth's attempts to eliminate the threat of Banquo's line fail when Fleance escapes and we have seen his immediate reaction to the show of the future eight kings when, unable to vent his rage on Banquo's line, he transfers it to Macduff's and eliminates the latter's family. His attempts to be revenged on life do not stop there, of course, as the horrors of his reign described in Act IV show only too well, testifying to his degeneration and indirectly to his inner despair. When we meet him in Act V his own survival has become his prime concern, but in the two final soliloquies, "This push will chair me ever" and "Tomorrow and tomorrow" we glimpse his total emotional and spiritual isolation. "Love, honour, obedience, troops of friends" he has forfeited in his efforts to secure his crown and the ultimate irony is that there is no filial head on which to place it. Human hopes of immortality have always lain either in religion's promise of an afterlife or in the thought that offspring will continue the line. Macbeth has neither consolation and in the great "Tomorrow" speech we see the despair of a man who sees himself condemned by both God and Nature to have no part in the future.
The importance of children in the structure of the play and in the development or rather the degeneration of Macbeth himself is reflected in the imagery throughout. It is now a commonplace of literary criticism of Macbeth that nature imagery helps to establish the dichotomies of order and disorder which underlie the action. Repeated images of babes and milk are used to signify natural goodness and innocence and references to plants, birds, and animals as well as to functions such as eating and sleeping build a background of the gentle flow of normal life. A closer look at these images reveals that many of them are not only connected with nature but with procreation and fecundity and can be seen on several occasions as supplying a specific contrast to the childless state of the two protagonists.

Examples of such highlighting appear in four consecutive scenes in Act I where the juxtaposition of various elements connected with procreation relates directly to Macbeth and his wife. First of all, Duncan, the father of two sons, is presented through images of planting, harvesting and feasting. There is undoubted fecundity in his “plenteous joys / Wanton in fulness” (I.iv.33-34). The scene then changes to Inverness and focuses on Lady Macbeth, who in her famous evocation to Evil in scene v speaks in images of female sexuality and parturition. In her desire to be “unsexed” she conjures up the repellant picture of suckling evil spirits (“Come to my woman's breasts …”) which links her to contemporary beliefs in the practice of the black arts, one of which was a witch’s suckling of her familiar by a supernumerary teat provided for the purpose. As we have seen, she returns to the subject of breast-feeding later on in her taunting of Macbeth when she produces the repugnant image of the child torn from the breast and beaten to death (I.vii.54-9). It is highly significant that Lady Macbeth's mental processes should repeatedly produce images of babes and sucklings when she is ostensibly concentrating on murder and this shows that she too is affected by the pressing need to produce an heir. Her natural instinct to create and nurture, however, is consciously crushed by her perverted will and ambition for her husband and is never regained. Her desire to be unsexed works only too well resulting in sterility of both body and soul.

The theme of fertility is moved to the animal kingdom when Duncan arrives at the castle at Inverness, a scene praised as much for the atmosphere of peace and harmony it conveys as for its dramatic irony. Banquo's beautiful words about the house-martin, however, are too detailed to be merely providing atmosphere and are more convincingly explained as a specific eulogy to procreation:

The temple-haunting martlet, does approve
By his loved mansionry, that the heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here: no jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made his pendent bed, and procreant cradle:
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observ'd
The air is delicate.

(I.vi.3-9)

The words loved, wooingly, pendent bed, procreant cradle, breed all combine to produce a picture of natural fecundity in the animal world outside the castle in contrast to the human sterility within; and almost as if to press home the point, Shakespeare immediately introduces Lady Macbeth whose entrance effectively cuts off Banquo's digression and destroys the harmonious atmosphere it has created. Macbeth's destruction of natural harmony and innocence is most graphically displayed in the scene where Lady Macduff converses with her little son and once again natural order is described with reference to birds. The wren will fight to protect her nestlings, despite her size; and young Macduff points to the example of the birds when asked how he will live without his father (IV.ii.9-11; 31-34).

Much of the impact of the serene and simple beginning of this scene comes from the contrast it makes with the foregoing one in which Macbeth meets the Weird Sisters or witches for the second time to find out the
details of his destiny. The black art of the witches is first shown as they concoct their poisonous brew. Among the ingredients are the “finger of birth-strangled babe” and the blood of a sow that “hath eaten her nine farrow” perversions of natural order that hint at the procreation theme. Once Macbeth enters he immediately demands to know the future, whatever destructive means this may involve, such as the unleashing of the winds, storms at sea and the laying of corn, all powers associated with witches at the time. The final image of his speech once again harkens back to the procreation theme in the vision of the total confusion of the hidden seeds of nature: “… though the treasure / Of Nature's germens tumble all together, / Even till destruction sicken” (IV.i.58-60). Confusion on this scale would result in monstrous births or even total barrenness and Macbeth's willingness to go to such lengths to gratify his own curiosity marks the nadir of his development. There can be little doubt that this image is drawn from the depths of frustration at his own sterility, and that there is an element of wreaking revenge on nature in the curse he invokes.

This necromantic scene is Shakespeare's own invention, using as a basis the prophecies mentioned by Holinshed that Macbeth “should never be vanquished, till Birnane wood were brought to Dunsinane; nor yet to be slain with any man, that should be or was born of any woman” (Bullough, 504). These lines are given dramatic form by Shakespeare in the three apparitions, the last two of which are children who prophesy Macbeth's fate: the bloody child representing Macduff, “ripp'd” from his mother's womb, who will avenge the murder of his own son; and the crowned child bearing the bough of a tree signifying the return of Malcolm and natural order. Encouraged by the equivocal answers they give him, Macbeth then demands to know if Banquo's issue will succeed him and is shown the long line of Stuart kings, the “seed of Banquo”. As we have seen, the sight turns Macbeth into a killer of other men's children, a destroyer of life when he cannot create it.

The success of the Stuart dynasty had reached its zenith when Shakespeare wrote Macbeth in honour of the new king of England, James VI of Scotland. James's accession to the English throne on the death of Elizabeth in 1603 settled the question of the succession which had been a matter of concern and speculation during the last years of the English queen's reign. The whole subject of the extinction of a royal line and the necessity for the sovereign to provide a legitimate heir to secure the succession was thus one of long and intense interest. Macbeth's childlessness reflected that of Elizabeth, who never married and was well aware that her crown would go to the son of her arch-enemy, Mary Stuart, because she herself was a “barren stock”. The subject was thus a topical and exceptionally relevant one.

Macbeth is a play of such poetic richness and psychological subtlety that many strands can be distinguished in its fabric. This study has sought to focus on one such strand: Shakespeare's combination of the question of the succession with the growing psychological desperation of the hero so that Macbeth's want of an heir becomes a major concern on both official and personal levels. The structure, the hero's development and the images of procreation all have a part to play in emphasizing the natural rhythms of life that Macbeth and his wife have flaunted by committing murder; and their childlessness, resulting in the loss of the succession, is arguably Nature's retaliation. For Macbeth is not so much concerned with the killing of a king as with the murderer's gradual realization that it has all been done for nothing. The “fruitless crown” and the “barren sceptre” thus lie at the centre of the play, shaping a final desolation for the hero; and perhaps the compassion that we feel for Macbeth at the end, in spite of all his crimes, is in some part due to Shakespeare's subtle awakening of our sympathy for the most unnatural of troubles.

Notes

1. L. C. Knights's essay (1933), reprinted in his Explorations (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946) criticizes A. C. Bradley's approach in Shakespearean Tragedy (London: Macmillan, 1904) and claims that Macbeth should be read as a “dramatic poem” rather than a study of character.


6. George Buchanan, Rerum Scoticarum Historia (Edinburgh, 1582) translated by James Aikman, 6 vols., Glasgow, 1827. Although the 1827 edition has been consulted, references are to the reprinted passages in Bullough.

7. John Leslie, De Origine, Moribus et Rebus Gestis Scotorum (Rome, 1587). See Bullough for a description and reproduction of Leslie's family tree of Banquo, thought to have influenced Shakespeare (441).


9. See the introduction to Act IV. ii in the Arden edition of Macbeth, ed. Kenneth Muir (1951; rpt 1994) 117. All subsequent references to the play are to this edition.

10. Macduff, Thane of Fife, was a powerful nobleman but did not belong to the royal line of Kenneth McAlpine from which the Scottish kings were elected. There is no indication either in the play or Shakespeare's sources that Macduff had any claim to the throne or ambition to be king. On the contrary, Malcolm later rewarded him for his loyalty by conferring special hereditary privileges on the Macduff family. See Alan Orr Anderson, Early Sources of Scottish History. A. D. 500 to 1286 (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1990) 580.


13. See Brooks, 46-47; Wilson Knight, 131; and Rosenberg, 674.

14. Wilson Knight, Knights and Brooks have all demonstrated this in some detail in their respective works cited in this study.


16. See Pennethorne Hughes, Witchcraft (London: Longman 1952, rpt. 1972)134; 141-46. Hughes' discussion of the practices of witchcraft takes up their connection with birth (many witches were midwives) and abortion.

17. It was W. C. Curry in Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns (1937) who identified “Nature's germens” as the hidden seeds of life which cannot be destroyed but can be so confused by evil forces that they become barren or only produce monstrosities. Anthony Harris mentions this and other aspects of witchcraft in Night's Black Agents: Witchcraft and Magic in Seventeenth-Century English Drama (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980) 36-37.

18. Elizabeth's words on hearing of the birth of Mary Stuart's son, James, are recorded as being: “The queen of Scots is this day leicther of a fair son, and I am but a barren stock” (Memoirs of Sir James Melville, 1583).

Criticism: Themes: Jan H. Blits (essay date 1996)


[In the following introduction, Blits studies Macbeth's concern with the limits of virtue and the violation of human and natural order.]
*Macbeth* depicts the life and soul of a Christian warrior who first becomes his kingdom's savior, then its criminal king, and finally its bloody tyrant. Set in eleventh-century Scotland, the play portrays Macbeth within the context of a moral and political order rooted in a natural order that is established by God. Far from being merely a backdrop for the play (as is often suggested), this natural order decisively shapes both the characters and the action of the drama. Shakespeare shows that what a character thinks about the natural order affects how he understands the moral and political world, and hence himself and his life. It makes him who or what he is.

The natural order that we see in *Macbeth* is a distinctly medieval Christian cosmos. Characterized by God's providence, plentitude, and pervasive presence, it appears to be a hierarchical, harmonious unity in which all being and goodness flow from God and what everything in the world is depends on God and its place in his scheme of creation. Throughout the play, something's “place” is not merely its spatial location, but its fixed “degree” or “rank” in the established order of things. Place refers to hierarchical position as well as to whereabouts in space. Likewise, God is generally thought not only to see everyone's every action and to know everyone's most secret thoughts (“Heaven knows what she has known” [5.1.46]), but to protect the innocent, punish the guilty, and, indeed, to feed the birds of the air and supply their other natural needs. Nothing escapes Heaven’s notice or concern. Even Macbeth and Lady Macbeth fear that Heaven will see them murdering Duncan and act to stop or to avenge the deed.

Further, as God not only sees but foresees all things, and as he, moreover, does nothing directly that can be done through intermediaries, the world in *Macbeth* is pervaded by a profusion of preternatural beings with the power to prophesy and to produce magical changes or effects in things. Nature is surrounded or suffused by the supernatural. Witches, angels, devils, saints, spirits, and other such beings permeate the world and, bridging the gulf between God and the human soul, are able to see what lies ahead and to transform what human power is unable to change.

Finally, since God wills and orders all things and nothing happens outside his providence, many of the characters in *Macbeth* believe that chance or fortune has little or no role in human affairs. Not only does the traditionally pious Old Man trust that good always comes of evil (2.4.40-41), but Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, on the one side, and Macduff and Lady Macduff, on the other, show by their actions as well as by their words that they believe that virtue possesses the power to govern the world. Notwithstanding their deep and direct moral opposition in other critical respects, each of them sees the world as a morally consistent order in which the virtuous are always rewarded or protected and virtue alone determines one's fate.

Shakespeare leads us, however, to examine the unity, harmony, and order of this medieval Christian cosmos. The medieval world—imbued with distinct and fixed ranks, the subordination and obedience of the lower to the higher, and a strong sense of plentitude, purpose, wholeness, and order in both the temporal and the spiritual realms—may set forth the natural order in high relief. But, in so doing, it also points up fundamental tensions that inhere not only within the medieval cosmos, but, by implication, within any unified, harmonious, natural order. In *Macbeth* we see two such tensions. One concerns the relation between two opposed forms of virtue; the other, the relation between virtue and life. The tensions themselves and the complex interaction between them, played out in the actions and the souls of the characters, form the essential core of the drama.

The first tension exists between the two contrasting forms of virtue esteemed in *Macbeth*’s warrior, Christian Scotland: the manly virtue practiced by men like Macbeth (“brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name)” [1.2.16]) and honored so highly by his wife, and the Christian virtue evoked by the “most sainted king” Duncan (4.3.109) and devoutly revered by Macduff. Manly virtue honors bravery, boldness, and resolution (“Be bloody, bold, and resolute” [4.1.79]); Christian virtue exalts meekness, innocence, and trust (“Whether should I fly? / I have done no harm” [4.2.72-73]). The former emphasizes fear while honoring war; the latter emphasizes love while celebrating peace. Manly virtue speaks of courage, action, prowess, vengeance, and resistance. It demands action while disdaining fortune. Christian virtue speaks of pity, patience, guilt,
forgiveness, and remorse. It demands innocence while trusting providence. What is fair in the light of one is
crude in the light of the other.

In *Macbeth*, Christian and warrior virtue exist side by side not only in the same country, but often in the same individual. While Macbeth, for example, is “Bellona's bridegroom” (1.2.55) and is spurred to Duncan's murder by his wife's accusation of unmanliness (“When you durst do it, then you were a man” [1.7.49]), he nonetheless not only looks up to Duncan's meek, angel-like virtues, but, repulsed by his thoughts of murder and eventually tormented by his murderous deeds, he is finally destroyed by his own Christian conscience. Indeed, haunted by his guilty conscience, he tries to destroy it and, in so doing, ultimately destroys both his conscience and himself. If manly ambition leads Macbeth to his first crime, paradoxically it is Christian conscience that drives him to his last. Had he either listened to his Christian conscience in the beginning or never heard it at all, he would not have become a bloody tyrant in the end.

The most obvious example of these opposed virtues coexisting in the same person, each in an untempered form, is Macduff. Macduff is at once a manly warrior and a devout Christian. No one, not even Macbeth, speaks more often or more assuredly of his sword than he (“My voice is in my sword” [5.8.7]). Nor does anyone else, not even the pious Old Man in act 2, scene 4, describe Scotland's moral and political events in explicitly biblical, let alone apocalyptical, terms so frequently or so emphatically as Macduff repeatedly does. Macduff trusts his sword and the cross equally. Thus he flees to England to bring back an army to overthrow Macbeth (“Let us rather / Hold fast the mortal sword, and like good men / Bestride our downfall birthdom” [4.3.2-4]). But, while doing so, he leaves his wife and children undefended, trusting their protection to God. And then, upon hearing of their slaughter, he does not doubt divine providence, but blames his own sinfulness for their fate:

> And would not take their part? Sinful Macduff!  
> They were all struck for thee. Naught that I am,  
> Not for their own demerits, but for mine,  
> Fell slaughter on their souls.  

(4.3.223-27)

Even while he believes that only the mortal sword can redeem Scotland's great wrongs, Macduff also believes in the existence of a moral order in which God guarantees the victory of goodness in the world and allows only sinners (or those they love) to suffer.

Similarly, Duncan, though completely lacking martial virtue, takes enormous delight in the bloody Captain's grisly account of the brave Macbeth. Disdaining fortune with his brandished sword, Macbeth carved his way through the rebels until he came face to face with their leader, whom he immediately ripped open from his navel to his jaw and whose head he then fixed upon the battlements. “O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!” (1.2.24), the “most sainted king” exclaims. And the bloody Captain himself, epitomizing the confusion, declares that he “cannot tell” whether Macbeth and Banquo “meant to bathe in reeking wounds, / Or memorize another Golgotha” (1.2.42, 40-41). To this good and hardy Scottish soldier, a warrior's bloodbath seems indistinguishable from the Crucifixion.

The first tension, then, involves the unreconciled forms of virtue practiced and esteemed in Macbeth's Scotland and, ultimately, the different conceptions of human life underlying them. The second tension, though less apparent, is still deeper. It is the tension within nature between virtue or order, on the one side, and life, on the other. Where the first tension involves the coherence of virtue, the second involves the coherence of nature itself.
While the word nature occurs very frequently in *Macbeth*, only twice (and both times with great ambiguity) could “nature” be understood as the source of moral evil. The Captain, mentioning the word for the first time, refers to the rebels swarming to Macdonwald as “The multiplying villainies of nature” (1.2.11): “villainies” might be either scoundrels or peasants, or both. And Lady Macbeth, wishing to unsex herself, offers prayers to murdering spirits who, she says, “wait on Nature’s mischief” (1.5.50): the mischief may be done by or to nature. Apart from this pair of possible exceptions, nature is associated throughout *Macbeth* with two things: with order and with life. The moral order is seen as part of the natural order, and the natural order is the source of, sustains, and, indeed, is characterized by, life. While in our day the prevailing view is that nature is essentially inanimate (inert matter in aimless motion) and freedom from nature, or even opposition to it, is the source of morality, in Macbeth's medieval Scotland, just the opposite seems the case. Nature is seen as embracing and sustaining both virtue and life. The source of the one, it is also the source of the other. It holds the moral and the biological realms together.

Thus, nature is often associated in *Macbeth* with gentleness (“the milk of human kindness” [1.5.17]), with pity and remorse (“the compunctious visitings of Nature” [1.5.45]), with nourishment (“great Nature's second course” [2.2.38]), with bountiful giving (“the gift [of] … bounteous Nature” [3.1.97]), and with a parent's love (“the natural touch” [4.2.9]). Its opposite is not so much convention or even the supernatural, both of which abound in *Macbeth*, as it is death or murder. “Death and Nature do contend about them,” says Lady Macbeth, “Whether they live, or die” (2.2.7-8).

Thus it is not surprising that the issue of children or of natural generation shapes much of the structure of the play. Both sets of the Witches' prophecies rest on it. First, Macbeth shall be king, but Banquo shall beget kings. The father will be happier, though lesser. Then, none of woman born shall harm Macbeth. Macbeth is invulnerable to anyone with maternal origins. And just as Macbeth tries to kill Banquo and his son so that his own son might succeed him on the throne, so his worst crime is the slaughter of Macduff's wife and children, for no reason other than that they are his wife and children—a crime for which Macduff, having been untimely ripped from his mother's womb, will kill Macbeth in return. Altogether, there are five father-son relationships in the play: Duncan's, Banquo's, Macduff's, Siward's, and Macbeth's own. Macbeth kills the first two fathers and the last two fathers' sons, while he himself, as Macduff pertinently notes, “has no children” (4.3.216).

And just as children and generation are crucial to the play, so, also, the central political issue in *Macbeth* concerns royal succession. Not only Macbeth but Duncan and Banquo as well seek to establish family dynasties—to “be the root and father / Of many kings” (3.1.5-6). Indeed, the last two, unlike Macbeth, eventually succeed. Their posterity become kings, while Macbeth, wearing “a fruitless crown” upon his head and holding “a barren sceptre in [his] gripe / Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal hand,” dies without an heir, “No son of mine succeeding” (3.1.60, 61, 62, 63).

Now, it may seem obvious that there is a tension between life and at least one of the two forms of virtue. For Macbeth's warrior virtue aims not at sustaining life, but at wreaking death (“Nothing afeard of what thyself didst make, / Strange images of death” [1.3.96-97]) and accepting it courageously (“He only liv’d but till he was a man; … / [And] like a man he died” [5.9.6, 9]). It surely is no accident that Shakespeare rhymes Macbeth's name (which, ironically, in Gaelic means “the son of life”) with the play's first mention of death:

> Go pronounce his present death,
> And with his former title greet Macbeth.

(1.2.66-67)

Nor does it seem coincidental that the play's first description of Macbeth depicts “brave Macbeth” as cutting a man “from the nave to th’ chops” (1.2.16, 22), from the sign of his birth to the jaws with which he eats.
less obvious way, the same fundamental tension seems also to exist for Christian virtue. As Macduff approvingly reports, the “most sainted” Duncan's wife, a woman who was “Oft'ner upon her knees than on her feet,” “Died every day she liv'd” (4.3.109, 110-11). Her virtue made her dead to the world.18

Shakespeare also shows, however, that the tension within nature between order and life is not limited to virtue's aims or effects. While one aspect of the tension involves virtue's life-destroying consequences, another involves, even more fundamentally, the necessary conditions for a natural order in which virtue is sovereign or supreme and nothing is left to chance. Macduff is able to preserve the Witches' prophecy that “none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (4.1.80-81), because he is “of no woman born”:

Macduff was from his mother's womb
Untimely ripp'd.

(5.8.15-16)

Macduff is not the child of a woman. Scotland is his “birthdom” (4.3.4); his country is his “mother” (4.3.166). Free from birth and hence from chance, he can believe that virtue—whether of the sword or the cross—is everything, and that fortune, which has such a large role in births, plays no part in human affairs. Whatever happens has moral significance, since only what comports with moral order is possible. The unborn Macduff thus literally embodies an impossible but necessary condition for a natural order in which virtue governs all. An incarnation of what Aristotle describes as “a probable impossibility,”19 Macduff illustrates the inherent tension between virtue and life by surpassing the intrinsic limits of a perfectly ordered natural whole. Malcolm, by contrast, a man who more than once owes his life to chance, believes strongly in the power of fortune and hence in the need to rule rather than be ruled by either Christian or manly virtue.

Macduff is not alone in believing in the sufficiency of virtue. As already suggested, both his wife and Lady Macbeth, as well as Macbeth, share his view. The two women are, of course, quite different from each other. Lady Macbeth, the voice of manly, warrior virtue in its wholly untempered form (1.7.49-51), fears that her husband is too full of the milk of human kindness. She wishes to unsex herself—to have murdering spirits come to her breasts and take her milk for gall—so that she would be cruel enough to kill Duncan. Indeed, she would rather murder her own son than forswear her promise to murder the king. In direct contrast, Lady Macduff, the voice of womanly, Christian virtue in its untempered form (4.2.72-78), fears her husband's lack of human kindness. Identified by Shakespeare only as “wife” and “mother,” she is all maternal love (4.2.8 ff.).20 She even refuses to hear that any other of Macduff's loves could possibly compete with his love as a husband and father. One woman wishes that both she and her husband were all manly; the other seems to be all womanly and wishes her husband were more so. Yet, even though these two women—the only women of major importance in the play apart from the Witches—represent opposite sides of the tension within virtue, both believe in the sovereign power of virtue. Just as Macduff thinks that only sinners suffer, his wife thinks that innocence suffices for safety. Warned of approaching danger, she asks, “Whether should I fly? / I have done no harm” (4.2.72-73). Those who have done no harm to others need fear no harm to themselves. Only the “unsanctified” is unsafe (2.2.80). Similarly, Lady Macbeth, overcoming her husband's final resistance to murdering Duncan, suggests that courage guarantees success:

We fail?
But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And we'll not fail.

(1.7.60-62)

Both women believe in the existence of a moral order in which chance plays no part and virtue, the only truly valuable thing, rules all. Both risk everything on this trust, and lose. And both denature themselves for their virtue. While Lady Macbeth, wanting to be entirely cruel, would unsex herself, Lady Macduff, fearing no
harm, forgets that she lives “in this earthly world” (4.2.74). One would expunge her bodily maternal function to become all male; the other forgets her home on earth while being all female.

Nothing, however, better epitomizes the tension within nature between virtue and life than their husbands. Macduff, all virtue, proves in the end to stand outside and against nature in its most obvious aspect. If his lack of natural birth is a precondition for his virtue, his virtue, in turn, leads to the destruction of all his children. A child without a mother, he becomes a father without a child. His own motherlessness results, finally, in his childlessness. In the end, his virtue proves entirely incompatible with natural generation.

Macbeth, by contrast, is childless from the start. Yet in what is no doubt the strangest and most revealing twist in the play, the childless Macbeth kills so that his own sons can succeed him on the throne (3.1.47-71). In the Republic, Socrates banishes not only families but human birth from the just city: virtue, not fortune, rules. Macbeth, in his own way, does the same. Collapsing both major tensions within the natural order at once, he makes manliness everything and subjugates generation to it. For him, we will see, virtue ultimately replaces sex, death replaces birth, murder replaces generation. Nature is entirely subsumed by virtue: the two senses of “blood”—lifeblood and deathblood—converge. Manly virtue itself produces sons. “Bring forth men-children only! / For thy undaunted mettle should compose nothing but males,” Macbeth tells his wife after she persuades him to carry out Duncan’s murder (1.7.73-75): manly men have sons. By murdering his rivals, the man called “Bellona’s bridegroom” and “Valour’s minion” (1.2.55, 19) aims to make his barren crown fruitful.

Notes


2. 1.5.53-54; 1.6.3-9; 1.7.21-25; 2.3.8-11; 2.4.4-10; 4.2.30-33, 72-78; 4.3.5-8, 141-59, 223-27.

3. E.g., 1.1.5; 1.3.8-10, 48 ff.; 1.5.1-16, 29-30, 40-50; 3.1.1-10; 3.4.122-25, 131-34; 3.5.2-33; 4.1.48 ff.; 4.3.141-59; 5.3.1-10; 5.5.42-46; 5.8.8-22.

4. E.g., 1.7.59-62; 3.1.56-63; 4.2.72-73; 4.3.223-27.

5. As Sir Thomas Elyot wrote (1531), “[T]he discrepancy of degrees, whereof proceeds order, … in things as well natural as supernatural has ever had such a preeminence, that thereby the incomprehensible majesty of God as it were by a bright leam of a torch or candle is declared to the blind inhabitants of the world.” Sir Thomas Elyot, The Boke Named the Gouernour, ed. Henry Herbert Stephen Croft, 2 vols. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1883), 1:3. I have modernized the spelling.

6. For “Whether should I fly” rather than “Whither should I fly,” see note 27, Act Four.

7. The close juxtaposition of the two kinds of virtue leads some critics to suggest that Christianity is still vague and only newly emerging in Macbeth's Scotland (see, e.g., H. B. Charleton, Shakespearian Tragedy [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971], 145 ff.; Paul Cantor, “Macbeth” und die Evangelisierung von Schottland [Munich: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 1993]). However, Scotland had been converted to Christianity by St. Columba nearly half a millennium earlier. Duncan is, in fact, the last, not the first, king to be buried on “Colme-kill” (Iona) (2.4.33-35; see also 1.2.63). Note also that Malcolm's name, in Gaelic, means “Follower of St. Columba.”


9. Also 4.3.3, 87, 234; 5.7.19.
Macbeth (Vol. 69): Further Reading

CRITICISM

Benardete, José A. “Macbeth's Last Words.” Interpretation 1 (summer 1970): 63-75.

Considers questions of guilt, damnation, and manly virtue in relation to Macbeth's character and that of the other principal figures in the play.


Extended survey of the sources, themes, language, and stage history of Macbeth.


Offers a psycho-social analysis of violence in Macbeth as it contributes to an understanding of Macbeth's character and motivation.

Argues that Shakespeare molds the tragic action of Macbeth out of a tension between Christian morality and the Scottish warrior ethos.


Observes the potential of Macbeth to directly challenge audiences with its tragic implications by comparing two eighteenth-century illustrations of a scene from the drama.


Collection of primary texts that are relevant to the historical and cultural context of Macbeth.


Surveys the sources, contexts, structure, themes, critical reception, and performance history of Macbeth.


Comments on Shakespeare’s varied and sometimes ironic use of bird imagery in Macbeth.


Asserts the thematic significance of Macbeth’s childlessness by exploring evocative allusions to Renaissance obstetrics and gynecology in the language of the play.


Relates Macbeth’s actions and subsequent demise to his violation of the historically pertinent theological doctrine of equivocation.


Endeavors to destabilize gendered references in the interaction of Macbeth’s witches in experimental performance and in the historical context of medieval witch hunts.


Evaluates the “philosophy” of Macbeth, that is, its concern with illusion, reality, and the human potential for evil.

Presents a reading of hospitality in Macbeth employing the poststructuralist theoretical perspective of Jacques Derrida.


Examines the literal and psychological significance of Lady Macbeth's entreaty that she be “unsexed,” that is, that her menstrual cycle cease and that she become barren.


Traces Shakespeare's use of irony in order to achieve catharsis in Macbeth.


Examination of Macbeth's witches within the historical and cultural context of Renaissance-era witchcraft.


Argues that in Macbeth Shakespeare fails to create the single-minded man of action necessary for the representation of a tragic hero.


Book-length study into the original context of Macbeth, with an aim toward making the unedited drama more successful in contemporary performance.

**Macbeth (Vol. 80): Introduction**

*Macbeth*

Among Shakespeare's shortest and most visceral dramas, *Macbeth* was likely written in 1606. Principally based on individuals and events described in Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577), the play details the rapid and brutal rise of the warrior Macbeth to the throne of Scotland. Spurred by the murky prophesies of three witches and the urging of his determined wife, Macbeth kills benevolent King Duncan, only to discover that this initial act of violence demands further bloodshed. Wracked by guilt while seeking to secure his tenuous position, he commits a string of atrocities that leads to his eventual death on the field of battle. *Macbeth* is generally considered to be one of Shakespeare's finest tragedies, often praised for its artistic coherence and the intense economy of its dramatic action, which is replete with vivid scenes of carnage and treachery. Regarded as one of Shakespeare's most profound and mature visions of evil, critics of *Macbeth* often study the play's extensive violence, its nightmarish atmosphere, and the enigmatic nature of its hero.

Scholars have primarily concerned themselves with the drama's title figure, a skilled warrior whose battlefield virtues contrast with his unchecked ambition, moral blindness, propensity to violence, and tyrannical nature once he ascends to the Scottish throne. Plagued by obsessive guilt for his nefarious deeds, Macbeth exudes a tragic grandeur and elicits a perverse sympathy from audiences that has intrigued generations of critics. Julian Markels (1961) concentrates on Macbeth as a tragic figure according to the classical, Aristotelian definition, reading *Macbeth* as a tragedy of personal degeneration. For Markels, Macbeth's villainous acts exist within a
frame of moral relevance that points toward his ultimate spiritual redemption, particularly as he regains his former heroic valor at the drama's conclusion. Macbeth's tragic undulation between primal destruction and Christian redemption also figures prominently in Michael Long's (1989) study of the character. For Long, Macbeth is a quintessential man of action. In the tragedy's ever-changing balance between primordial evil and Christian salvation, however, Macbeth struggles with an insatiable, primeval, and satanic desire for annihilation. While Shakespeare's brutal Thane of Glamis and short-lived King of Scotland continues to draw the vast majority of critical attention, to a lesser degree contemporary commentators have also analyzed Lady Macbeth. Although a relatively small role in terms of lines spoken, Lady Macbeth is generally considered one of the most fascinating female characters in Shakespearean drama. Garry Wills (1995) summarizes her dramatic appeal as a strange amalgam of unrepentant evil, repressed ambition, diabolical sexuality, and maddening guilt. Turning to a subordinate figure in the play, John Turner (1992) discusses the infrequently assessed King Duncan. Acknowledging that Duncan is generally cast as a weak figure in performance and virtually ignored by critics who see him as merely a virtuous ruler, Turner interprets the murdered king as a symbol for feudal ideology. A proponent of political bonds based on the ideal of mutual reciprocity and trust, Duncan and the social framework he represents collapse when confronted by the unrestrained malice of Macbeth.

A notorious work in production with a long and storied theatrical history, Macbeth continues to be one of Shakespeare's most compelling stage plays, in part due to its mystique as a powerful dramatization of evil. In recent years, the work has elicited a range of experimental approaches and demonstrated its international appeal. Reviewing a 1995 adaptation of the drama by Zen Zen Zo, an independent theater company in Kyoto, Owen E. Brady finds this interpretation to be an expressionistic mixture of horror and comedy, and a frenetic, ritualized performance that distilled Macbeth into an iconic representation of human corruption. Kit Baker witnessed a 1997 production of Macbeth in the Croatian capital of Zagreb under the direction of Henryk Baranowski. Baker notes Baranowski's concentration on the internalized brutality of Shakespeare's drama, capturing its strong psychological resonance with disturbing and provocative visual metaphors, particularly evocative in light of Zagreb's war-torn atmosphere. For Baker, the principal flaw of the production was its relentless gloom, which seemed to deaden any redemptive movement in the play. Bruce Weber attended a 2002 Japanese-language production directed by Yukio Ninagawa, which was long on style but short on substance according to the critic. Weber claims that the beautiful and graceful actors, dazzling spectacle, and breathtaking choreography ensured audiences would be entertained, but that Ninagawa left the deeper dramatic issues of the tragedy largely unexplored. Reviewing the 2001 season at the Shakespearean Globe, Lois Potter finds Tim Carroll's highly stylized staging of Macbeth as a contemporary upper-class social event effective by degrees, but at times uneven. Potter admires the believable interpretations of Macbeth and his wife as modern socialites, but contends that Carroll's attempt lacked any real context in which the events of the drama could logically unfold. Viewing the same production, Richard Hornby gives an even more negative evaluation. Although Hornby admires Carroll for his innovative interpretation of Shakespeare and praises the clearly articulated verse, he maintains that everything else—choreography, set, characterization, and costumes—led to unmitigated disaster. Looking back to the early twentieth century, Irena R. Makaryk (1998) examines a 1924 performance of Macbeth directed by the avant-garde Ukrainian Les' Kurbas. Kurbas's modernist approach employed extreme expressionistic and stylized methods, using them not to convey Macbeth's internal turmoil, but rather to question the relationship between theater and objective reality. The results scandalized bourgeois theatergoers. Still, the impact of Kurbas's modernism on stage interpretations of Macbeth remains evident in contemporary productions, in which a tension between expressionistic abstraction and psychological realism prevails.

Scholars are interested in uncovering the complex thematic structure of Macbeth, approaching the drama from many perspectives in order to embrace its combined psychological, moral, philosophical, social, and linguistic concerns. Miguel A. Bernad (1962) identifies five thematic levels in Macbeth, including the tragedies of Macbeth's personal disintegration, Lady Macbeth's guilty ambition, the moral collapse of a valiant soldier into a murderer, the inversion of social order precipitated by Macbeth's violent usurpation, and finally the
theological component of the drama as a tale of mortal sin without repentance. Maynard Mack (1981) offers a complementary list of themes in Macbeth, seeing the work as the delineation of a usurper's rise and fall, a documentation of Renaissance concerns with witchcraft, a parable of pride, a metaphysical study of the distinction between what is real and what is unreal, an exposition of the collapse of communal bonds, and a moral tale of judgment focused on a deeply flawed human being. Macbeth is seen as a “tragedy of equivocation” by many critics, who generally view Macbeth's deep ambivalence and amorality as a central theme in the work. Irena Kaluza (1990) applies the concept of equivocation to the drama as a whole, interpreting Macbeth as a play that achieves its tragic balance through doubt, deception, hypocrisy, and hidden meaning. William O. Scott (1986) focuses on a process of recognizing and decoding equivocal statements, from the witches' inscrutable prophesies to Macbeth's own vague and deceptive self-avowals. A. R. Braunmuller (see Further Reading) also examines the play's varied language and imagery, noting that Macbeth's poetic, sometimes impenetrable speeches and Shakespeare's use of paradox, antithesis, and contradiction serve a thematic function by mirroring Macbeth's attempts to conceal and evade his murderous crimes, hiding them from others and himself. Taking a philosophical approach to theme, King-Kok Cheung (1984) applies Søren Kierkegaard's notion of existential dread to Macbeth, observing the effects of an ominous, ambivalent, and indefinable fear that suffuses the drama. Lastly, Leon Harold Craig (2001) studies Macbeth as Shakespeare's most metaphysical work. According to Craig, the foreboding evil that pervades the tragedy is a cosmological one that calls into question the nature of reality, appearance, time, contingency, and being.

**Criticism: Overviews And General Studies: Miguel A. Bernad (essay date winter 1962)**


*In the following essay, Bernad offers a thematic survey of Macbeth, emphasizing five distinct aspects of tragedy—physical, psychological, moral, social, and theological—within the play.*

One of the most remarkable things about Shakespeare's Macbeth is the artistry with which the playwright has woven five distinct tragedies into one. Hamlet is intriguing, King Lear is profound, but Macbeth is complex, and it is this complexity which gives the play its richness, making a study of it so rewarding and every stage performance a new discovery. Paradoxically, the play is complex despite an extremely simple plot. There are no sub-plots. But the action is made to advance at five different levels, each of which may be called a distinct tragedy because each involves a reversal of fortune in a particular order.

I

At the most obvious level is the physical tragedy—physical, for want of a better term—in which a person of high estate (to adopt Bradley's paraphrase of the well-known Aristotelian definition) falls into an exceptional calamity involving complete ruin or death. A matchless soldier, kinsman to the king, wins the king's battles and the king's praise; but prompted by inner ambitions and external urgings he murders the king and assumes the crown, which he soon finds to be a “sterile” crown. Since “to be thus is nothing but to be safely thus”, he plunges into an orgy of crime which eventually loses him his queen, his crown and his life.

This straightforward action makes for dramatic neatness. Everything is tucked in. There are no loose ends, as there are in Hamlet or in Lear. Its neatness of construction, unity of action, swiftness of movement, and great compression and brevity (at least in the state in which the text has come down to us) have prompted the critics to liken Macbeth to a Greek tragedy—in so far as the baroque could be likened to the classic.
But this simplicity is merely apparent, for a Shakespearian play is never thin. The simplicity of Macbeth is coupled with an intensity which made Bradley call it “the most vehement, the most concentrated, perhaps we may say the most tremendous, of the tragedies”.¹ Macbeth's downfall involves more than the mere loss of life or crown. It involves another downfall equally real: the rapid and radical disintegration of two splendid personalities.

II

There can be no doubt that Macbeth is initially a splendid personality. His conduct in war is spectacular. He is “brave Macbeth”, “Bellona's bridegroom”. He is impervious to fear when merely natural foes confront him. For him there is no terror in the “rugged Russian bear, the arm'd rhinoceros or the Hycran tiger”. Even at the end, with defeat inevitable, he is still the soldier who will fight “till from my bones my flesh be hacked”. Only for one moment does he falter, as indeed any human being might.

Such a soldier commands respect. There is nothing puny about him. If his crimes are enormous, they are committed by a man who has the makings of greatness.²

Lady Macbeth, likewise, has the makings of greatness. Even if one were not prepared to accept Bradley's assessment of her as “the most commanding and perhaps the most awe-inspiring figure that Shakespeare drew”,³ one must acknowledge a greatness visible in the very distortion of feminine nature which in others is tender, yielding, dependent, but which in her is iron-willed, masterful, dominant. No ordinary woman could call upon the spirits of darkness as she does:

That tend on mortal thoughts; unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top full
Of direst cruelty.

(I.v.41-44)

If this wickedness is horrible, it is the wickedness of the horribly strong.

Neither Macbeth nor his wife is “normal”, if by normal is meant the ordinary, the mediocre, the run-of-the-mill. No tragic hero or heroine is normal in that sense. Tragedy is the downfall of a person in high estate, but this “high estate” is not merely a political or social concept; it includes a personal dimension which has nothing to do with the physical. The hero must be a moral colossus, gigantic in moral stature, drawn on a “heroic”—therefore an abnormal—scale. Though other mortals be made of spirit and clay, in him there must be less of the clay and more of the spirit, even if it be the proud spirit of Lucifer. But Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are “normal” in another sense of the term, for they are not insane. Initially, they are not maniacs. They become progressively less sane as the story unfolds. Their personalities, initially splendid, disintegrate. Having tried to control others, they end by losing control of themselves. Magnificent at first, they become, in the one case, a monster of iniquity, in the other, a pathetic victim of hallucinations who ends by killing herself.

III

This gradual disintegration of character is fascinating to watch. It begins harmlessly and imperceptibly enough in a certain abstractedness: “Look how our partner's rapt.” It betrays itself further in a certain jumpiness, and even in hallucinations “proceeding from the heat oppressed brain”: Macbeth sees a bleeding dagger in the air; Lady Macbeth sees a resemblance of her father in Duncan; both start at the hoot of the owl, the cry of the wolf, the shout of a man—though apparently no one has shouted. Keyed up as they are, they lose nerve at the
crucial moments: she at the point of delivering the fatal blow, he after it.

Lady Macbeth, who at the beginning is unaffected by imaginary fears and could laugh at apparitions, is later tormented by an imaginary spot. Macbeth, before his crime, is fearless of blood and could “doubly redouble” strokes upon the foe “as if to memorize another Golgotha”; after his crime, the sight of blood on his hands unnerves him, and the sight of Banquo's gory locks sends him into hysterics. The “sights” that overcome him “like a summer's cloud” become habitual, haunting him by day, torturing him at night, making him “eat his meal in fear”.

In the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly.

(III.ii.17-19)

It is interesting to note that this permanent loss of sleep is ironic. Let them but gain possession of the throne, says Lady Macbeth (echoing what every ambitious person has said before and since), and there will be a lifetime of joy.

Which shall to all our nights and days to come
Give solely sovereign away and masterdom.

(I.vi.69-71)

Yet no sooner are the words spoken and the crime perpetrated than they find their nights and days no longer their own. Sleep is no longer possible. Macbeth's hysterical announcement is prophetic: “Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor shall sleep no more.” In the end, they envy the very victims whom they have killed:

Better be with the dead
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy.

(III.ii.19-22)

How much better off is Duncan, who is beyond the touch of any vicissitude, than is his murderer:

Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.

(III.ii.22-26)

After life's fitful fever he sleeps well: how enviable that must be to those who could not sleep!

In desperation, Macbeth seeks solace in blood. But it brings him no peace. He becomes perpetually restless, subject to fits and moods. One moment he puts on his armor, the next he pulls it off. One moment he bellows defiant orders; the next moment he whimpers in defeat. Edmund Kean, we are told, when acting Macbeth, would run out on the stage and shout in a voice of thunder, “Hang out our banners on the outward walls!” Then a pause. His sword drops to the ground. And he whispers: “The cry is still, 'They come, they come.'”

“What a noble mind is here o'erthrown”, says Ophelia of Hamlet. May not the same be said of Macbeth and his lady?
Oddly enough, after this disintegration has gone a long way, Lady Macbeth begins to elicit our sympathy and even our affection. There is nothing lovable about her as she chastises her husband “with the valour of her tongue”, or as she calls upon the powers of evil to unsex her. She is the ambitious, unscrupulous, cruel woman who would pluck the infant smiling at her breast and dash its brains out. But beneath this iron front is a heart of flesh that must eventually recognize its own weakness. To bolster up her husband's courage, she puts up a brave front; but when alone, she sees how empty-handed she is:

Nought's had, all's spent,
When our desire is got without content.

(III.ii.4-5)

Obviously, no sympathy can be wasted on her when she is towering in her strength. But man is by nature compassionate and there is compassion for this evil woman when things have gone against her. She has become like a scared little girl, suddenly conscious of all the wrong she has done. When there was real blood on her hands, she had dismissed the matter lightly.

My hands are of your colour; but I shame
To wear a heart so white.

(II.ii.63-65)

Nothing seemed easier than to wash away both blood and guilt: “A little water clears us of this deed.” But after the blood is washed away, the blood remains. When she is asleep, when that iron control is relaxed, when sleep “that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care” no longer knits it, then all the suppressed fears and regrets come up to the surface, and what she could not or would not see when waking, she sees when asleep. She sees the blood on her hands. She smells it. All the perfumes of Arabia could not sweeten that little hand.5

It is then that she utters that triple sigh which must tax the acting ability of even the greatest actresses. “What a sigh is there”, says the doctor; “the heart is sorely charged.” To which the lady attendant replies: “I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body.”

At such a time, Lady Macbeth becomes an object of sympathy. She is the heart-broken little girl sitting on the doorstep, weeping over her broken doll. No man is so callous as not to have compassion on her weeping.

For Lady Macbeth, after all, is only a woman. And even her greatest ambition, criminal though it is, has a strangely unselfish quality. It is not for herself but for her husband that she wants the crown. “It is of him she thinks: she wishes to see her husband on the throne, and to place the sceptre within his grasp.” In this, Shakespeare departs from his sources, “purging his Lady Macbeth of the personal ambition that the Lady Macbeth of the chronicles appears to be full of.”6

In such a frame of mind, the spectator may find it easy to share Macbeth's anxiety over his wife's illness. He pleads with the doctor to cure her. He pleads wistfully, knowing that his pleading is in vain. For even the doctor is helpless: “More needs she the divine than the physician.”
The spectator of such a scene is not a dispassionate observer merely. He is involved somehow in the request to have her cured. He wants the patient cured. And he shares the frustration that Macbeth feels when told that his wife is dead: “She should have died hereafter. There would have been a time for such a word.” Lady Macbeth, hateful in the hour of victory, becomes an object of affection in her hour of defeat. From a tragic, she has become almost a pathetic figure. And that is her tragedy: she, who sought to rule the world by ruthlessly crushing others, comes closest to ruling it when her own heart is crushed.

V

There is a third tragedy, a downfall in the moral order. On this point it seems necessary to take exception to what some of the better critics have said, who sometimes speak as if the characters of a play were static creatures who from play's beginning to play's end retain the same interior qualities. Thus Elmer Stoll, agreeing with Bridges, speaks of the “unpsychological contrast”, or contradiction of “a brave and honourable man plunged into cowardly and dishonourable conduct; an ambitious man, with his thoughts, both before and after the crime, set, not upon the reasons which would impel or justify him, but upon those which deter him”.

But the point is, that the brave and honorable man becomes cowardly and dishonorable by committing a cowardly and dishonorable deed, and, in so doing, opens the door for greater cowardice and dishonor. The soliloquy

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly

(I.vii.1-2)

is that of a man who has already ceased to be honorable, at least in intention, although he is still aware of the demands of honor. Later on, even the idea of honor no longer means anything to him.

All causes shall give way.

For mine own good

(III.iv.135-136)

The character of Macbeth has visibly deteriorated. The first suggestion of murder “unfixes” his hair and makes his heart pound against his ribs “against the use of nature”. But it is a principle both of moralists and of detective story writers that the first crime is the hardest, and that one crime leads to another with progressive ease. The murderer, having done violence to all that he holds sacred, finds it less violent to repeat the deed. He becomes used to the idea of murder and when occasion offers will resort to it again. “Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill” (III.ii.55). So it is with Macbeth. The anguish soul-searching that precedes the murder of Duncan is entirely absent from the murder of Banquo. Murder becomes second nature to the murderer. He has “supped full with horrors”, until nothing becomes any longer horrible. He has waded so deeply in blood that “returning were as tedious as go e'er” (III.iv.138). The man who at first was aware of his “double trust”, not unmindful of the loyalty that he owed Duncan as king, as kinsman and as guest, the man who was not without a sense of gratitude towards so gentle and generous a sovereign, later on becomes so completely callous as to order the murder not only of his enemies but of their wives, children and servants, and he entertains the opinion that he has scarcely begun to do anything evil! “We are yet but young in deed” (III.iv.144).

Such a man eventually comes to hate, not only his enemies because they are evil to him, but any good man
precisely because he is good. He orders Banquo's death because

Reigns that which would be fear'd:
... and under him
My Genius is rebuked, as it is said
Mark Antony's was by Caesar.

(III.i.50-57)

This gradual hardening of the heart, this blunting of the conscience, this obfuscation of the mind, this loss of a moral sense ending in a total callousness to evil, is not as easily perceptible as the downfall “of a person in high estate”: but it is a downfall none the less. It is a tragedy in the moral order as real (if not as spectacular) as the physical and political downfall of a king.

It is ironic that as the moral sense becomes more blunted, the person, instead of enjoying greater peace of mind, enjoys far less.

VI

At this point the splendid craftsmanship of the Banquet Scene becomes apparent. It is one of the best constructed scenes in Shakespeare, and it is entirely his, since there is no mention of it in Holinshed. It is sometimes said that the turning point of the play is the escape of Fleance. This may be true historically but not dramatically. From a dramatic point of view, Fleance's escape is of little importance, hardly affecting the action of the play. The real turning point, or peripety, of the play is not Fleance's escape but the great Banquet Scene, in which, among other things, Fleance's escape is announced and the ghost of Banquo appears. Macbeth involuntarily reveals his secret crimes in the presence of his entire court gathered with the greatest pomp and circumstance for a state dinner.

It is a glittering scene, the kind that Shakespeare, with an eye for theater, gloried in. The lords and ladies of the kingdom, dressed in their robes of state, file into the banquet hall and are shown to their places—for protocol must be observed and the order of precedence followed minutely: “You know your own degrees.” There is a sound of trumpets, the lords and ladies bow, the attendants enter, and behind them, in full regalia, the king and queen. It is an hour of triumph for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. They mount the dais. The queen sits down. Macbeth, smiling and in a hearty voice, bids everyone welcome:

And last, the hearty welcome.

There is a murmur of thanks, a sound of shuffled chairs, the lords help the ladies, then they themselves sit down.

The king does not sit down. He feels so carefree, he must descend from the dais and mingle with the guests. There is a heartiness in his voice and a smile on his countenance as he announces this.

Ourself will mingle with society,
And play the humble host.

The queen remains on the dais. She will keep her state, but “in best time” she will descend to mingle with the guests. It is of course dramatically ironic that when she does descend, it will not be “in best time” but in worst. This, however, is in the future. There is no hint of it as yet. There is no cloud on the horizon. Lady Macbeth is gracious. Macbeth is jovial. Both are the perfect host and hostess:
LADY Macbeth.

Pronounce it for me, Sir, to all our friends;
For my heart speaks, they are welcome.

MACBETH.

See, they encounter thee with their hearts' thanks.

It is their hour of triumph. Why not? Are not all the lords and ladies here (Macduff, of course, and Banquo excepted), attired in glittering robes of state? And are not all here to acclaim Macbeth's and his queen's "solely sovereign sway and masterdom"?

There is of course another cause for rejoicing. Banquo at this moment is being put out of the way—Banquo the troublesome, Banquo who knew too much. Banquo and his son, Fleance, destined to beget kings. Macbeth has never felt more secure. He feels that from now on nothing can trouble his peace. He feels "perfect":

Whole as the marble, founded as the rock,
As broad and general as the casing air.

There is a chair in the middle of the guests' table. It is the seat of honor, reserved for Banquo. With charming informality Macbeth goes to the chair and sits down with the guests.

Both sides are even; here I'll sit in the midst.

He urges everyone to enjoy himself. Later on he intends to propose a jovial toast:

Be large in mirth: anon, we'll drink a measure
The table round.

At this moment (Shakespeare likes to indulge in sharp dramatic contrasts) there is a little interruption. A liveried page comes into the banquet hall and whispers a message in the king's ear. Someone to see him outside. Macbeth stands up. The lords and ladies start to rise to their feet but he prevents them. He goes to the door. The murderer stands before him. "There's blood upon thy face", says the king, anxiously. The reply is boastful: "'Tis Banquo's then." Ah. That's fine. Macbeth can afford to joke: "'Tis better thee without than he within." He says it with a chuckle, pointing with his thumb towards the banquet hall. But he wants explicit information: "Is he dispatched?" Dispatched. The thug does not know what the word means. His vocabulary is limited. He is a blunt man who calls a spade a spade.

My Lord his throat is cut;
That I did for him.

Macbeth chuckles. He indulges in a pun: "Thou art the best of the cut-throats." And of course, without a doubt, Fleance must be dead too?

he's good that did the like for Fleance:
If thou didst it, thou art the nonpareil.

And then, for the first time during that glittering evening, something goes wrong. The murderer hesitates, looks down on his hands, shifts his weight from one foot to the other. "Most royal sir—" he breaks off and looks away. Macbeth stares at him. What can possibly have happened? Speak up, man! The murderer blurts it out. "Fleance is scap'd." Macbeth is stunned. In a moment all his security has gone crashing to the ground. He
now feels constrained, suffocated: “cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd”.

The fit, however, is momentary. After all, the essential thing has been done. Banquo is dead. If Fleance has escaped, at least he is not yet a full-grown serpent. He has no venom yet, “no teeth for the present”. Macbeth goes back to the banquet hall, and resumes the manner of the hearty host:

Now, good digestion wait on appetite,  
And health on both.

He even gives a little speech, the type of flattering speech one hears at banquets:

Here had we now our country's honour roof'd,  
Were the grac'd person of our Banquo present;  
Who may I rather challenge for unkindness  
Than pity for mischance.

It is safe enough to talk of Banquo. Safe in a ditch he lies. But something has again gone wrong. There had been an empty chair before. Now the table seems full.

Pleas't your Highness  
To grace us with your royal company?

Why doesn’t he sit down? Why does he look puzzled around the table? “The table’s full!” Why, the man must be getting blind. Can't he see? “Here is a place reserv'd, sir.” Macbeth looks about him in bewilderment. “Where?” They point to the empty chair. “Here, my good lord.” But the king is staring at that empty chair. He is staring in an intent manner, his eyes bulging. What can be the matter? “What is't that moves your Highness?” Then the king speaks. His voice is unnatural. He is trembling all over:

Thou canst not say I did it: never shake  
Thy gory locks at me.

There is consternation all around. Someone gets up. Someone shouts: “Gentlemen, rise! his highness is not well!” Everyone is on his feet. The queen rushes down from the dais. No, no. Sit down. Sit down everybody. This is nothing. Nothing at all. Go on eating, please! In a moment she is beside her husband. “Are you a man?” she whispers hoarsely. But he answers aloud, for every one to hear

Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that  
Which might appal the devil.

Oh nonsense, she says. This is another one of your hallucinations.

Why do you make such faces? When all's done  
You look but on a stool.

But Macbeth sees more than a stool. And he proceeds to give more damning revelations as he continues to look on the horrible spectacle which he alone sees.

The apparition vanishes. Macbeth heaves a sigh of relief. He wipes the perspiration from his forehead. But the harm is done. The dinner is spoiled.

He tries to save the pieces by proposing a toast. Give me a cup. Fill full. Lords and ladies, I give you—Banquo. Would he were here. And of course he is there. The cup crashes to the floor. The wine is spilled. “Avaunt! and quit my sight! let the earth hide thee!” He enumerates the blood-curdling details:
Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;
Thou hast no speculation in those eyes,
Which thou dost glare with.

The queen tries to cover up. This is a common sickness of his. It is nothing. Pay no attention to it. But it is
difficult not to pay attention to the shouting king:

Unreal mockery, hence!

The ghost vanishes again. And Macbeth recovers.

I am a man again. Pray you, sit still.

But the harm has been irretrievably done. The cat is out of the bag. Macbeth has revealed his crimes to the
entire court. There is a pointedness to Ross's question: “What sights, my lord?” To prevent further revelations,
Lady Macbeth has no choice but to dismiss the company peremptorily.

At once, good night.

Stand not upon the order of your going,
But go at once.

Few banquets have ended as precipitately as that. What had started as a royal dinner has ended as a shambles.
And Macbeth, who began the evening with a feeling of confident cheerfulness, now feels that he is doomed.
“It will have blood, they say: blood will have blood.” You can't hide a murder. The birds, the trees, the very
stones will reveal the “secretest man of blood”.

There is now no more hope. He will go betimes to the weird sisters to “know, by the worst means, the worst”.
He has waded so deeply in blood, he might as well go in deeper. There is no backing out now. For his own
good, all things must give way. If he is doomed to destruction himself, he can at least destroy others. He has
just begun. He is but young in deed.

That is the Banquet Scene. It is a grand peripety. And it dramatizes effectively the moral tragedy of Macbeth.

VII

If Macbeth's tragedy is a disturbance of right order in the physical, psychological and moral world, it is no less
so in the social. It is a rending of the social fabric, an overturning of the right order, a twisting of the right
relationship among human beings. This seems the significance of the repeated use of the word “unnatural”.
The play is full of “unnatural” images: a mousing owl kills a soaring falcon; Duncan's horses, “beauteous and
swift, the minions of their race”, turn wild and eat each other; darkness covers the face of day “when living
light should kiss it”; and the weird sisters, who should be women, have the beards of men. Unnatural, too, is
the suspicion that falls upon the grooms: they have killed the king whom they were supposed to protect. More
unnatural is the suspicion that falls on Malcolm and Donalbain, who are suspected of killing their father.
These are of course but images of the really unnatural thing: “the nearer in blood, the nearer bloody”.

The murder of Duncan is a multiple sin. It is a sin against God and against society on many counts: it is
murder—a sin against justice; it is the murder of a kinsman—a sin against piety; it is regicide—a sin against
fealty, a sin of sacrilege as the Middle Ages understood sacrilege, and of perjury since in medieval times it
was the violation of an oath. Finally, it is the murder of a guest by his host—a sin against the rules of
hospitality which all civilized nations deem sacred. “False face must hide what the false heart doth know”
(I.vii.82).
It is significant, as Stoll remarks, that Shakespeare soft-pedals what might have been considered a mitigating circumstance in Macbeth's crime. Duncan's appointment of Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland and heir-apparent was a violation of the rules of succession. That fact could well have given Macbeth a grievance which, though it could not possibly justify murder, might at least have elicited sympathy for him as an injured party. By glossing over this circumstance, Shakespeare deprives Macbeth of any grievance, and makes his crime stand out in stark heinousness, without any possible motive for it except “vaulting ambition”.9

The murder of Duncan is only the beginning of the eversion of the social order. Once the usurper is on the throne, the reign of law gives way to the reign of terror. The tyrant has a spy in every household. Every day

New windows howl, new orphans cry; new sorrows
Strike heaven on the face. ...

(IV.iii.4-6)

It is an unnatural state of affairs, and nature must reestablish itself. Order must be restored, but at the expense of those who violate it.

Nature seems dead

(II.i.49-50)

says Macbeth when he commits his first crime. But nature is far from dead. Nature is very much alive, and it is a vengeful nature.

Do breed unnatural troubles.

(V.i.78-79)

So Lady Macbeth must walk in her sleep: “A great perturbation in nature, to receive at once the benefit of sleep, and do the effects of watching” (V.i.10-12). And the tyrant himself must feel the tortures of anxiety: “O full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife” (III.ii.36). Macbeth feels old age coming, perhaps prematurely. His way of life “has fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf”. But he cannot hope for the natural consolations of old age. These are not available to him who has violated nature:

And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but in their stead,
Curses, not loud, but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would feign deny, and dare not.

(V.iii.24-28)

The land is sick; there is no medicinal herb or purgative drug that could purge it. There is only one cure: the tyrant's death.

The disease in the end is cured. The body politic is purged. Order is reestablished. It is ever thus in Shakespeare. No matter what upheavals may occur, in the end right order reasserts itself. Lear foolishly divides his kingdom, only to have it reunited under Albany. Caesar is murdered and a civil war ensues, only to have another Caesar give orders about the disposal of Brutus' corpse. Hamlet dies, as does almost everybody else, but Fortinbras arrives in time to assume the reins of state. Shakespeare is a believer in the social order. It
is an order capable of reestablishing itself—but at the expense of those who have tried to destroy it. And in *Macbeth*, it is significant that the downfall of those who have violated the social order begins in that great symbol of social solidarity, the banquet.

**VIII**

There remains the theological tragedy, a distinct dimension of the moral and social drama we have been considering.

This theological dimension is seen, first of all, in the preternatural influences that are brought to bear upon the action. The weird sisters are a “supernatural soliciting” that act like a catalyst. They do not plant in Macbeth a desire for the crown, which presumably he has already entertained:

> Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear Things that do sound so fair? (I.iii.51)

But if they do not give him the idea, they induce him “to catch the nearest way”. Later, they induce in him a recklessness arising from false security. “Be bloody, bold and resolute.” Hamlet's mistake (from a purely dramatic point of view) is in not heeding the ghost despite confirmatory evidence; Macbeth's is in paying too careful attention to these “juggling fiends”

> That palter with us in a double sense; That keep the word of promise to our ear, And break it to our hope. (V.vii.48-51)

But the theological dimension of *Macbeth* is likewise seen in another direction altogether. It is impossible to read Shakespearian tragedy without perceiving its theological implications. For Shakespearian tragedy deals with such things as sin and free will, guilt and retribution, fate and chance, good and evil, God and human destiny, God's goodness and the problem of human suffering, God's love and man's inhumanity to man. These are the basic problems of man, and these are theological problems.

There is a sense in which we may consider the story of Macbeth a special theological tragedy, over and above the moral, psychological and social tragedy already considered above. Although every mortal sin is (in a manner of speaking) a tragedy, since it entails the loss of God's friendship and the frustration of man's end; nevertheless repentance wipes away sin. “If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made white as snow: and if they be red as crimson, they shall be white as wool” (Is.i.18). For this reason, though every sin is a misfortune, it is not proper to speak of it as tragic. The Church herself, while condemning sin, speaks of Adam's sin as a happy fault—*O felix culpa quae tantum meruit Salvatorem*—as if Adam had actually done us a favor by sinning!

It is of course only a manner of speaking, but it illustrates the point we wish to make, namely, that although in one sense every serious sin is tragic, in another sense there is only one sin that is really and truly and hopelessly tragic—and that is final impenitence. Peter sinned, Peter repented, Peter is a saint; Judas sinned, Judas hanged himself. “It were better for that man never to have been born.” Judas' sin is tragic, Peter's is not.

In this sense, Macbeth is theologically a tragic figure. He is different from Lear or Hamlet: both are sinners, but both die repentant. Macbeth realizes his sin and its consequences. He deplores the uselessness of his crime:
For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murther'd
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace,
Only for them; and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man,
To make them kings. ...

(III.i.64-70)

But to regret the uselessness of a crime is not repentance. At no time is Macbeth repentant. Wilson Knight perhaps does not put the matter very happily when he says (with reference to V.iii.24 ff.), “Macbeth at the last, by self-knowledge, attains grace.” Self-knowledge is indeed a grace and is a first step towards repentance. With Macbeth the self-knowledge does not lead to repentance, but remains in the realm of self-pity.

In the end he gives way to despair. His crimes have brought him nothing but ruin. He grows weary of life itself. He finds it has no meaning: a walking shadow, a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. The point about these comparisons is not that they are literally true—for they are not—but that they are dramatically true. They express the meaninglessness of life to a man who has expected too much from it, and who, in trying to grasp all, has lost all. Having rejected life's true meaning, he finds it in the end meaningless.

The full horror of his sins is that they are committed with full knowledge of their being against the law of God, and with a deliberate decision to risk damnation in hell: “We'd jump the life to come.” But one cannot jump the life to come. One must be ready to pay the consequences. One cannot deliberately turn one's back on God and expect to do it with impunity.

Within the framework, therefore, of Christian theology, which is the framework of the play, Macbeth's soul is damned. He dies unrepentant. He is no longer his own master. He has become a slave of “the common Enemy of Man”: “the angel whom thou still hast serv'd” (V.vii.43). Having gained the world, he has lost his soul. To the Christian that is the greatest tragedy.

When Shakespeare's other tragic heroes die, tender things are said of them. “This was the noblest Roman of them all”, says Antony of Brutus. Of the dying Othello it was said that “he was great of heart”. When Lear's great and foolish heart finally breaks, it is like the breaking of a dike, and all the hearts around him are overwhelmed in the flood. When Hamlet dies, he is called a “sweet prince”. But when Macbeth dies, he is called a “hell-hound”. And it is the only appropriate word. How “noble Macbeth” has turned into a hell-hound is a tragedy in the physical, psychological, moral, social, and theological order. It is the fearful downfall of a spirit that had the makings of greatness.

Notes

1. A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy (1904), lecture 9. On the “simplicity” of Macbeth, see lect. 10; on its brevity, Appendix, Note AA.
2. Robert Bridges among others has called attention to this heroic stature of Macbeth. The interest in Macbeth, he says, “is the perpetration of a crime by a man whose magnificent qualities of mind, extreme courage and poetic imagination, raise the villainies above common meanness and give occasion for a superhuman conflict of images and ideas.”—Apud E. E. Stoll, Art and Artifice in Shakespeare (1933, reprinted New York 1951), p. 78.
3. Shakespearean Tragedy, lect. 10.
5. For an amusing anecdote that illustrates how real Mrs. Siddons made this blood seem on her hands, see Furness' Variorum Macbeth, p. 477.


8. Wilson Knight has put it very well: “So he fears, envies, hates Banquo who has the reality of honour whereas he has but the mockery, a ghoulish dream of reality. He envies Banquo's posterity their royal destiny won in terms of nature, not in terms of crime …” The Imperial Theme (3rd ed. London 1951), p. 131.


10. The Imperial Theme, p. 128.

11. Citations from the play are from the Oxford Shakespeare, ed. Craig.

**Criticism: Overviews And General Studies: Maynard Mack (essay date 1981)**


*[In the following essay, originally published in 1981, Mack examines many of the central thematic concerns of Macbeth, including usurpation, witchcraft, pride, crime, the blurring of the real and unreal, the collapse of community, and final judgment.]*

1 After Lear, Macbeth seems at first glance a simple play. Seen in one light, it simply tells the brutal story of a Scottish usurper whom Shakespeare had read about in one of his favorite source-books, Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Holinshed's Macbeth is an arresting figure, not so much because of his murderous career, which seems to have been only a little in excess of the habits of his time, as because he is said during his first ten years of rule to have “set his whole intention to mainteine justice,” and during his last seven years to have begun to “shew what he was, instead of equitie practising crueltie.”

Shakespeare, though no historian, knew that no man wears a mask of virtue for ten years, only to reveal that he was “really” a butcher all along. This oddity in Holinshed's conception may have challenged him to speculations that ended in a conception of his own: that of an heroic and essentially noble human being who, by visible stages, deteriorates into a butcher. The great crimes of literature, it has been well said, are mostly committed by persons who would ordinarily be thought incapable of performing them like Othello, like Brutus in Julius Caesar, like Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment. The hero that Shakespeare draws in Macbeth is no exception. At the beginning of the play, even the thought of murder stands his hair on end, makes his heart knock at his ribs (1.3.135). By the end, he is too numb to care. His wife's death scarcely stirs him, and the wild cry of her women in their grief only reminds him of what he can no longer feel:

*The time has been my senses would have cooled  
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair  
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir  
As life were in't. I have supped full with horrors.  
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,  
Cannot once start me.  
*(5.5.10)*

2
Coming at the play from another angle, we realize that its medieval story of the rise and fall of a usurper has been colored by, and also in some sense mirrors, a number of contemporary interests and events. In 1605, for instance, just a year before the probable date of the play's composition and first performance, came the revelation of the Gunpowder Plot, a plan to blow up King, Lords, and Commons in Parliament as they convened for the new session of that year on the fifth of November. The plot was made known through an anonymous letter only ten days before the intended massacre, and the climate of shock and suspicion that prevailed throughout England, especially London, immediately thereafter has almost certainly left its mark in the play's haunted atmosphere of blood, darkness, stealth, treachery, and in the vividness with which it communicates the feeling that a whole community based on loyalty and trust has been thrown into terror by mysterious agencies (both unnatural and natural) working through it like a black yeast. Several of the conspirators were from Warwick, Shakespeare's own county, and may have been known to him. If so, there was no doubt personal as well as dramatic relevance in such observations of the play as Duncan's “There's no art To find the mind's construction in the face” (1.4.12), or Macbeth's “False face must hide what the false heart doth know” (1.7.82). At the very least, such statements, however they were meant by their author, would have held an exceptional charge of meaning for the play's first audiences in 1606.

Witchcraft, too, is among the contemporary interests that the play draws into its murderous web. Witchcraft was a live issue at all times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but it loomed especially large in the public mind after the Scottish James I came to power, following the great Elizabeth, in 1603. James considered himself an authority on witches, had published a book on demonology in 1599 affirming their existence and their baleful influence in human affairs, and, in 1604, a year after his accession to the throne, inaugurated new statutes against them. Thus, the whole topic was accentuated at just about the time of the writing of the play.

Except in one phrase (1.3.6) and in the stage directions, the play always refers to the witches as weyard—or weyward—sisters. Both spellings are variations of weird, which in Shakespeare's time did not mean “freakish,” but “fateful”—having to do with the determination of destinies. Shakespeare had met with such creatures in Holinshed, who regularly refers to the supernatural agents with whom Macbeth has dealings as “the three sisters,” or “the three weird sisters,” i.e., the three Fates. The witches in the play, however, are by no means so unambiguously defined. They have considerable power of insight and suggestion, we gather, but they do not determine a man's will, and Macbeth never blames them for influencing what he has done, only for tricking him into a false security. They are presented to us, moreover, in a climate of suggestion that is fully as demeaning as it is aggrandizing. If they belong with one part of their nature to an extra-human world of thunder, lightning, rain, and demonic powers (1.1), and, as Banquo says, “look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth” (1.3.41), they have nevertheless some of the attributes of defeminized old women; their familiar demons assume shapes no more terrible than those of cat and toad; and the actions with which they identify themselves—killing swine, wheedling chestnuts, and persecuting the “rump-fed ronyon’s” (1.3.6) sea-going husband—show a pettishness and spite that seem perhaps more human than diabolical.

On the other hand, the weyard sisters are obviously more impressive than the ordinary garden variety of seventeenth-century witch, the village crone or hallucinated girl, and their collusion with such dire agents as Lady Macbeth calls upon (1.5.45) and Macbeth invokes (4.1.50) seems unmistakable. The obscurity with which Shakespeare envelops their nature and powers is very probably deliberate, since he seems to intend them to body forth, in a physical presence on stage, precisely the mystery, the ambiguity, the question mark (psychological as well as metaphysical) that lies at the root of human wrong-doing, which is always both local and explicable, universal and inexplicable, like these very figures. In their relations with Macbeth, they are obviously objective “real” beings with whom he talks. Yet they are also in some sense representative of potentialities within him and within the scheme of things of which he is a part.

What is emphatically to be noticed is that the weyard sisters do not suggest Duncan's murder; they simply make a prediction, and Macbeth himself takes the matter from there. The prediction they make, moreover, is
entirely congenial to the situation, requires no special insight. Having made himself in this last battle more than ever the great warrior-hero of the kingdom and its chief defender, what more natural than that the ambitious man should be moved in the flush of victory to look ahead, hope, imagine? Hence, while recognizing the objectivity of the sisters as diabolical agents, we may also look on them as representing the potentialities for evil that lurk in every success, agents of a nemesis that seems to attend always on the more extreme dilations of the human ego.

Besides the lore of witchcraft, in which he was intensely interested, and the great Plot which threatened to destroy him together with his Parliament, James's own tenure of the English throne seems to be celebrated, at least obliquely, in Shakespeare's play. His family, the Stuarts, claimed descent from Banquo, and it is perhaps on this account that Shakespeare departs from Holinshed, in whose narrative Banquo is Macbeth's accomplice in the assassination of Duncan, to insist on his “royalty of nature” and the “dauntless temper of his mind” (3.1.50). Many critics see a notable compliment to James in the dumb show of kings descending from Banquo (“What, will the line stretch out to th’ crack of doom?” (4.1.117) which so appalls Macbeth at the cave of the weyard sisters. Some commentators, influenced by its Scottish background and its use of a story involving one of James's reputed ancestors, go so far as to suppose that the play was actually composed for a royal occasion and conceivably by royal command. What is certain, in any case, is that the playwright has effectively transformed a remote and primitive story—which at first looks simple—into a theatrical event tense with contemporary relevance. The almost routine assassination of a weak, good-natured king in Holinshed becomes, in Shakespeare's hands, a sensitive and terrifying exposition of the abyss a man may open in himself and in the entire sum of things by a naked act of self-will.

This brings us to the third face of Macbeth, its character as parable, as myth. For all its medieval plot and its framework of Jacobean feeling, the play has a universal theme: the consuming nature of pride, the rebellion it incites to, the destruction it brings. In some ways Shakespeare's story resembles the story of the Fall of Satan. Macbeth has imperial longings, as Satan has; he is started on the road to revolt partly by the circumstance that another is placed above him; he attempts to bend the universe to his will, warring against all the bonds that relate men to each other—reverence, loyalty, obedience, truth, justice, mercy, and love. But again, as in Satan's case, to no avail. The principles his actions violate prove in the event stronger than he, knit up the wounds he has made in them, and combine to plunge him into an isolation, or alienation, that reveals itself (not only in social and political but in psychological terms) to be a kind of Hell. As Milton's Satan was to put it later in Paradise Lost: “Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell.”

In other ways, the story Shakespeare tells may remind us of the folktale of which Marlowe's Dr. Faustus is one version: a man sells his soul to the Devil in return for superhuman powers only to find in the end that his gains are illusory, his losses unbearable. It is true, of course, that Shakespeare's hero is attracted by the Scottish throne, not by magic or by power in general; and it is likewise true that he signs no formal contract like his predecessor. Still, the resemblances remain. Macbeth does open his mind to diabolical promptings:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature?

(1.3.130)
He imagines himself, moreover, to have received immunities of a superhuman sort:

I will not be afraid of death and bane
Till Birnam Forest come to Dunsinane.

(5.3.59)

But swords I smile at, weapons laugh to scorn,
Brandished by man that's of a woman born.

(5.7.12)

And he finds in the end, like Faustus, that his gains amount to nothing:

I have lived long enough. My way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.

(5.3.22)

The very immunities he thought had been guaranteed him prove deceptive, for Birnam Wood comes to high Dunsinane after all, and so does an antagonist not born of woman in the usual sense. In the end, Macbeth knows that what he had begun to fear after Duncan's murder, in the course of meditating Banquo's, is true: he has given his soul to the Devil to make the descendants of Banquo, not his own descendants, kings. All his plans have become instrumental to a larger plan that is not his:

They hailed him father to a line of kings.
Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,
Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,
No son of mine succeeding. If't be so,
For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered,
Put rancors in the vessel of my peace
Only for them, and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man
To make them kings—the seeds of Banquo kings.

(3.1.60)

As Freud noticed long ago, the two Macbeths complement each other in their reactions to the crime. Her fall is instantaneous, even eager, like Eve's in Paradise Lost; his is gradual and reluctant, like Adam's. She needs only her husband's letter about the wewayrd sisters' prophecy to precipitate her resolve to kill Duncan. Within an instant she is inviting murderous spirits to unsex her, fill her with cruelty, thicken her blood, convert her mother's milk to gall, and darken the world “That my keen knife see not the wound it makes” (1.5.50). Macbeth, in contrast, vacillates. The images of the deed that possess him simultaneously repel him (1.3.130, 1.7.1). When she proposes Duncan's murder, he temporizes: “We will speak further” (1.5.69).
Later, withdrawing from the supper they have laid for Duncan to consider the matter alone, he very nearly decides not to proceed. It takes all her intensity, all her scorn of what she wrongly chooses to call unmanliness, to steel him to the deed. Throughout this first crime, we notice, it is she who assumes the initiative and devises what is to be done (1.5.64, 1.7.60). Yet we would certainly be wrong to see her as monster or fiend. On the contrary, she is perhaps more than usually feminine. She is conscious of her woman's breasts, her mother's milk (1.5.45); knows "How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me" (1.7.55); and, when she thinks to carry out the murder herself, fails because the sleeping King too much reminds her of her father (2.2.12). We may infer from this that she is no strapping Amazon; Macbeth calls her his dearest "chuck" (3.2.45), and she speaks, when sleep-walking, of her "little hand" (5.1.48). Thus such evidence as there is suggests that we are to think of her as a womanly woman, capable of great natural tenderness, but one who, for the sake of her husband's advancement and probably her own, has now wound up her will almost to the breaking point.

An equally important contrast between the two Macbeths appears sharply in the scene following the murder, one of the most powerful scenes that Shakespeare ever wrote. Their difference of response at this point is striking—not only because he is shaken to the core and cannot conceal it, whereas she shows an iron discipline throughout, but also because his imagination continues as in the past to be attuned to a world of experience that is closed to her. That world is visionary and even hallucinatory, we can readily see, but at the same time, it is the mark of a keener moral sense, a fuller consciousness of the implications of what they have done, than she possesses.

The difference between his and her responses is related to a form of double vision that extends throughout the play. Shakespeare establishes for us from the beginning one perspective on his story that is symbolic and mythical, a perspective that includes both the objective wayward sisters, on the one hand, and the subjective images of horror and retribution that rise like smoke from Macbeth's protesting imagination, on the other. The play also establishes, as a second perspective, the ordinary historical world of Scotland, where Duncan is king, Macbeth becomes king, Malcolm will be king, and the witches are skinny old women with beards. In general, Macbeth enacts his crimes in the historical world, experiences them in the symbolic world, and out of this experience, new crimes arise to be enacted in the former. To put it in different terms, a force that seems to come from outside the time-world of history impinges on history, converting history into an experience for Macbeth that is timeless and mythical. We are asked to sense that his crime is not simply a misdeed in the secular political society of a given time and place, but simultaneously a rupture in some dimly apprehended ultimate scheme of things where our material world of evil versus good and virtue versus vice gives way to a spiritual world of sin versus grace and hell versus heaven.

5

The suggestiveness of Shakespeare's play in this larger sense is inexhaustible. Every element is contains lives with a double life, one physical, one metaphysical. Consider night, for instance. Night settles down halfway through the first act and stays there through much of the rest of the play: 1.6-7, 2.1-4, 3.2-5, 4.1, and 5.1 are night scenes, and several more, undetermined in the text, could be effectively presented as such, e.g., 1.5 and 4.2-3. All this is ordinary nighttime, of course, but it is obviously much more. "Thick," "murky," "full of "fog and filthy air," it "entombs" the face of earth (2.4.9), "blots out the stars and the moon, "strangles" even the sun (2.4.7). Duncan rides into it to his death, as does Banquo. Lady Macbeth evokes it (1.5.48) and then finds herself its prisoner, endlessly sleepwalking through the thick night of a darkened mind. Macbeth succumbs to its embrace so completely that, in the end, even a "night-shriek" cannot stir him.

Or again, consider blood. "What bloody man is that?" are the play's first words, following the first wayward sisters' scene. Like the night, blood is both ordinary and special. It sticks like real blood: "His secret murders sticking on his hands," says Angus of Macbeth (5.2.17). It smells as real blood smells: "Here's the smell of the blood still," says Lady Macbeth (5.1.47) hopelessly washing. Yet it finally covers everything Macbeth has
touched, in ways both qualitative and quantitative that real blood could not. The sleeping grooms are "all badged" with it, their daggers "Unmannerly breeched with gore." Duncan's silver skin is "laced" with it (2.3.108), Banquo's murderer has it on his face (3.4.14), Banquo's hair is "boltered" with it (4.1.123), and Macbeth's feet are soaked in it (3.4.136). Perhaps the two most bloodcurdling lines in the play, when expressively spoken, are Macbeth's lines after the ghost of Banquo is gone: "It will have blood, they say: blood will have blood" (3.4.122) and Lady Macbeth's moaning cry as she washes and washes: "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" (5.1.35).

Macbeth's style of speech in the play has something of this same double character. The startling thing about much of it is its inwardness, as if it were spoken not with the voice at all, but somewhere deep in the arteries and veins, communing with remote strange powers.

Light thickens, and the crow
Makes wing to th' rooky wood;
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.

(3.2.50)

Between the two battles that open and close the play, Macbeth's language seems frequently to lean away from the historical world of Scotland toward the registering of such experience as rises, timeless and spaceless, both from within his mind and beyond it. Thence come thronging those images that "unfix my hair" (1.3.135), the presences that will "blow the horrid deed in every eye" (1.7.24), the voices that cry "Sleep no more!" (2.2.34), the ghost that returns from the dead to mock him for what he has failed to achieve, and the apparitions that are called with great effort from some nether (but also inner) world only to offer him the very counsels that he most wants to hear.

These continuous blurrings of the "real" with the "unreal," intrusions of what is past and supposedly finished into the present (Banquo's ghost, 3.4) and even into the theoretically still formless future (Banquo's descendants, 4.1), provide an appropriate sort of environment for Macbeth and his wife. Lady Macbeth is easily "transported," we learn from her first words to her husband, "beyond This ignorant present" to feel "The future in the instant" (1.5.54). In a similar way, Macbeth's imagination leaps constantly from what is now to what is to come, from the weyard sisters' prophecy to Duncan's murder, from being "thus" to being "safely thus" (3.1.48), from the menace of Banquo to the menace of Macduff, and from a today that is known to an unknown "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow" (5.5.19). Shakespeare vividly records in these ways the restlessness of the Macbeths' ambition and at the same time the problem that ambition, like every other natural urge to self-realization, poses for human beings and their relationships to each other.

6

To understand this problem in the dramatic and poetic terms Shakespeare gives it, it is helpful to look at two of the play's most often noticed features. One is feasting. Macbeth withdraws from the supper he has laid for Duncan to weigh the arguments for killing him (1.7). The entertainment, which he has himself ordered, marks his adherence to the community of mutual service that we find implied in the scene at Duncan's court (1.4). Here is a society, we realize, that depends on thane cherishing king—"The service and the loyalty I owe," Macbeth tells Duncan, "In doing it pays itself"—and on king cherishing thane: "I have begun to plant thee," Duncan assures Macbeth, "and will labor To make thee full of growing" (1.4.28). When Macbeth withdraws, therefore, we see him retreating from the shared community of the supper that he has provided for Duncan and the other thanes into the isolation that his intended crime against that community implies. Once he has withdrawn and his withdrawal is sealed by murder, he can never rejoin the community he has ruptured. This he discovers at the feast in 3.4, when the ghost of Banquo preempts his place. The only community left him
after this is the community of dark powers we see him appealing to in 4.1, where the weyard sisters dance about a hell-broth (also a feast?) of dislocated fragments. After 3.4, we never see Macbeth in the company of more than one or two other persons, usually servants, and in the last act his forces ebb inexorably away till there is only himself. Similarly, and with similar implications, after 3.4 we never see Macbeth and his wife together. Instead of being united by the crime, they are increasingly separated by it, she gradually lost in the inner hell that she finds so “murky” in the sleepwalking scene, he always busier in the outer hell that he has made Scotland into.

The other much commented on feature is children. Four children have roles in the play: Donalbain, Malcolm, Fleance, and the son of Macduff. Two children are among the apparitions raised by the weyard sisters in 4.1: “a Bloody Child” and “a Child Crowned, with a tree in his hand.” Allusions to children occur often. We hear of the child or children Lady Macbeth must have sometime had (1.7.54), of the son Macbeth wishes he had now to succeed him (3.1.64), and of pity, who comes “like a naked new-born babe Striding the blast” to trumpet forth Macbeth’s murderous act till “tears shall drown the wind” (1.7.21). Plainly, in some measure, all these “children” relate to what the play is telling us about time. Macbeth, in his Scottish world (though not in his demonic one), belongs like the rest of us to a world of time: he has been Glamis, he is Cawdor, and he shall be (so the weyard sisters predict) “King hereafter” (1.3.50). The crux, of course, is hereafter. Macbeth and his wife seek to make hereafter now, to wrench the future into the present by main force, to master time. But this option, the play seems to be saying, is always disastrous for human beings. The only way human beings can constructively master time is Banquo’s way, letting it grow and unfold from the present as the Stuart line of kings is to grow and unfold from Fleance. The more Macbeth seeks to control the future, the more it counters and defeats him (in Fleance, Donalbain, Malcolm, the bloody child, the crowned child) and the more he is himself cut off from its creative unfolding processes—having had children we are told, but having now only a “fruitless” crown, a “barren” scepter. “No son of mine succeeding” (3.1.64).

Toward the play's end, Malcolm and his soldiers move in on Dunsinane with their “leavy screens” (5.6.1), and very soon after this Macduff, the man who “was from his mother's womb Untimely ripped,” meets Macbeth (5.8), slays him, then reappears with his head fixed on a pike. What did Shakespeare intend us to make of this? All that can be said for certain is that the situation on stage in these scenes has some sort of allusive relation to the three apparitions that were summoned at Macbeth's wish by the weyard sisters. The first was an armed head—matched here at the play's end, apparently, by Macbeth's armed head on a pike. The second was a bloody child, who told him that none of woman born could harm him. This child is evidently to be associated with Macduff. The third apparition was a crowned child holding a tree—an allusion, we may suppose, to Malcolm, child of Duncan, who is soon to be crowned King, who is part of the future that Macbeth has tried in vain to control, and who now with his men, holding the green branches of Birnam Wood, seems calculated to remind us of the way in which Nature, green, fertile, “full of growing,” (1.4.29) moves inexorably to “overgrow” a man who has more and more identified himself with death and all such destructive uses of power as the armed head suggests.

If these speculations are at all well founded, what takes place in the final scenes is that a kind of Living Death, a figure who has alienated himself from all the growing processes, goes out to war encased in an armor that he believes to be invulnerable on the ground that nothing in the scheme of nature, nothing born of woman, can conquer Death. But he is wrong. Death can always be conquered by the bloody child, who, being ripped from the womb as his mother lay dying, is indicative of the life that in Nature's scheme of things (like the green leaves in Birnam Wood) is always being reborn from death.

To leave the play on this abstract and allegorical plane, however, is to do it wrong. What comes home most sharply to us as we watch these last scenes performed is the twistings and turnings of a ruined but fascinating human being, a human being capable of profound even if disbalanced insights, probing the boundaries of our
common nature ever more deeply in frantically changing accesses of arrogance and despair, defiance and cowardice, lethargy and exhilaration, folly and wisdom. Underscoring this, we have the succession of abrupt changes from place to place, group to group, and speaker to speaker that marks scenes 2 to 8 in Act 5, an unsettling discontinuity which does much to dramatize our sense of a kingdom coming apart at the seams. In the background, too, we hear the gradually swelling underbeat of the allied drums, called for by the stage directions in 5.2, 4, 6, and 8, and audible elsewhere if the director desires. This gives a sensory dimension to the increasing prosperity of Malcolm's cause, and can be made particularly dramatic and significant in 5.5. Here, following the scene's opening, we hear Macbeth's drums for the only time in the play. Then comes the famous soliloquy, where he assures us that life is an empty fraud, a “tale told by an idiot.” If, at the close of this, when the door to Dunsinane opens to admit the messenger bearing the news of Birnam Wood, we hear again in the distance the steady beat of the allied drums signifying the existence of a very different point of view about the value of life, the impact is powerful.

Perhaps the most telling sensory effect in these final scenes is the call of trumpets. We hear them first on the appearance of Macduff, whose command may remind us of Macbeth's earlier prognostication about “heaven's cherubin” riding the winds and blowing the fame—or infamy—of the murder of Duncan through the whole world:

Make all our trumpets speak, give them all breath,
Those clamorous harbingers of blood and death.

(5.6.9)

We then hear their alarums with the next entry of Macduff, who is now searching for Macbeth, and again with the exit of Malcolm; alarums once more when Macduff and Macbeth begin to fight and when they go fighting off stage; and finally, three massed flourishs of trumpets, one as Malcolm enters after the sounding of retreat, a second as Macduff and the other thanes hail Malcolm king, and a third as all go out, Macbeth's head waving somberly on Macduff's spear (5.8.35). The former age has been wiped away and the new age inaugurated, fittingly, to the sound of the trumpets of a Judgment.

All this, we understand, is as it must be. Alike as ruler and man, Macbeth has been tried and found wanting. Yet we realize, as we hear Malcolm speak of “this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen” (5.8.69)—and we realize it all the more because of these last scenes, in which a great man goes down fighting, bayed around by enemies external and internal, natural and even supernatural, committed to the Father of Lies but taking the consequences like a man—how much there is that judgment does not know, and how much there is that, through Shakespeare's genius, we do.

**Criticism: Character Studies: Julian Markels (essay date summer 1961)**


*[In the following essay, Markels reads Macbeth as a tragedy of personal degeneration, concentrating on Macbeth as a tragic figure according to the classical, Aristotelian definition and examining his potential to elicit sympathy and find redemption.]

Nor, on the other hand, should an extremely bad man be seen falling from happiness into misery. Such a story may arouse the human feeling in us, but it will not move us to either pity or fear; pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves.
There remains, than, the intermediate kind of personage, a man not preeminently virtuous and just. …

Aristotle, *Poetics*.

Macbeth, as a tragic hero, is a man with a capacity, one might almost say a taste, for damnation. This capacity … is not so very different from a capacity for salvation. *Macbeth* is a terrible play because its business is to give us some notion of what that damnation is which a man embraces when he is, indeed, man enough for it.

Arthur Sewell, *Character and Society in Shakespeare*.

To an age like ours, deeply concerned with the metaphysics of guilt, the disintegration of personality, and the waning relevance of our traditional criteria for civilization, *Macbeth* offers a peculiarly revealing image of human nature and experience. It is one of the few masterpieces in English whose protagonist grows in depravity without diminishing our pity for him, so that even when he stands before us unmistakably as a “butcher”, we do not condescend to him, but painfully share his guilt. We are able to apply to Macbeth the murderer that remark which we have usually reserved for the pitiful hero-victims of the drama, like Othello and even George Barnwell and Willy Loman: “There but for the grace of God go I.”

So unusual a response immediately raises for the critic one of those crucial and endlessly appetizing problems of technique. How does Shakespeare do it? How does he manage consistently to engage our sympathy on behalf of Macbeth even as he represents Macbeth's growing brutality and witlessness? How does he keep his protagonist from becoming a conventional stage villain, and his play from becoming the more usual and less moving “punitive” drama, in which we feel morally superior to the protagonist, his judges rather than his fellow citizens? Paradoxically, just because our response to the play is so unusual, we are prompted to examine not the moral implications of that response, but the dramatic technique which produces it.

Hence it is not surprising that the two critics who have most convincingly explained *Macbeth*’s “degenerative” quality, Mr. Francis Fergusson and Mr. Wayne Booth, both should have concerned themselves (though in very different ways) with the structure of the play; and neither should it be surprising that both critics have grounded their arguments on precepts and assumptions set forth in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Mr. Fergusson demonstrates that the Aristotelian action imitated by *Macbeth* is “To outrun the pauser, reason”, which is perhaps the best way to embrace damnation. Mr. Booth, more directly concerned with the method of the play, shows that Shakespeare manages to imitate this “degenerative” action largely by his wisdom in knowing which episodes of his story to narrate only, and which to represent directly on the stage; that is, by his adroitness in manipulating what Aristotle calls the “manner” of tragic imitation. It is surely a tribute to Aristotle, and a rebuke to those critics who think *The Poetics* irrelevant to all drama except *Oedipus*, that two critics with a markedly Aristotelian bias may still greatly enhance our understanding of a Shakespearian masterpiece. And our enhanced understanding is evidence itself that *The Poetics* has for us a relevance which is not historically conditioned, that it can help us to understand the work of playwrights who themselves may not have read it, or, if they did, may have understood it differently from the way we do.

Yet if Aristotle's treatise is to retain and perhaps enlarge its relevance, if it is to remain for us a useful and elucidative instrument of criticism, then I think it must be scrutinized in turn as we use it, so that we may be continuously mindful of its limitations as a means of enriching our awareness of its potentialities. I am so thoroughly persuaded especially by Mr. Booth's analysis of *Macbeth* that I want to amplify it here, and particularly to extend its Aristotelian thrust: I suspect *The Poetics* is even more illuminating to *Macbeth* than Mr. Booth's argument has indicated. But my purpose is not so much to add “make-weight” to that argument as it is to test and I hope to clarify the Aristotelian criteria by which such an argument proceeds, to test Aristotle's theory by Shakespeare's practice. I think it is precisely in his discussion of the “manner” of tragic
imitation, of that concept which does prove so illuminating to *Macbeth*, that Aristotle is contradictory, and especially unfortunate in his denigration of the visual machinery of the drama which he calls “Spectacle”; and I think that Shakespeare's incredible skill in handling the “manner” of his imitation, and especially its Spectacle, enables us to recognize the limitations in Aristotle's formulation of his concept, and thereby to recognize larger possibilities in that concept than a reading of *The Poetics* would readily suggest. Surely, if poor Shakespeare can be systematically tested by Aristotle, he should be permitted to strike back, as it were, and to provide what I hope to show is some needed light on *The Poetics*.

There is apparent in *The Poetics* a certain ambivalence of conception, in which Aristotle sometimes thinks of Tragedy as an object in nature whose form is “immanent”, and sometimes as a made object whose form is truly wrought and whose intention is more emphatically what we today call “affective” than simply imitative. This general ambivalence informs the discussion of the “manner” of imitation, where Aristotle characteristically equates “manner” with Spectacle and describes it quantitatively, as merely the visual trappings in which the tragedy is decked out, but where occasionally he describes it as a truly functional element, whereby the poet manipulates the audience's feelings by his choice of which episodes of the tragic action to narrate only, and which to represent visibly on the stage. This emphasis on Spectacle conceived merely as accidental stage machinery obscures the functional importance of “manner” in producing the tragic emotions and catharsis; and it obscures the importance of that element of visual apprehension which is common to both meanings of “manner”. This prevents him from anticipating that in a play like *Macbeth*, even the gross visual trappings of the imitation may indeed be indispensable to produce the desired tragic catharsis.

In the fundamental analogy of *The Poetics*, Aristotle compares Tragedy to a natural object:

> Again: to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts, but also be of a certain definite magnitude. *Beauty is a matter of size and order*, and therefore impossible either (1) in a very minute creature, since our perception becomes indistinct as it approaches instantaneity; or (2) in a creature of vast size—one, say, 1000 miles long—as in that case, instead of the object being seen all at once, the unity and wholeness of it is lost to the beholder. Just in the same way, then, as a beautiful whole made up of parts, or a beautiful living creature, must be of some size, but of a size to be taken in by the eye, so a story or Plot must be of some length, but of a length to be taken in by the memory.\(^3\)

He is speaking here of the Plot only, but the Plot is after all the “life and soul, so to speak of Tragedy”, the part wherein “unity and wholeness” must originate. As with the object in nature, so with the imitation, we are invited to perceive the relation of the parts to each other and to the whole: while an elephant and a Tragedy represent different principles of arrangement, each is admired as it manifests the arrangement proper to its kind. Several times in *The Poetics* Aristotle speaks about Tragedy's “natural form”, and he frequently reminds us not to expect of Tragedy “every kind of pleasure … but only its own proper pleasure.” We discover finally that the proper pleasure to be had from Tragedy in its natural form is a catharsis of pity and fear, produced by an arrangement of episodes which shows a good man “passing by a series of probable or necessary stages … from happiness to misfortune.”

This conception of Tragedy as a natural object implies a highly indirect relationship between the poet and his audience, in which the poet simply constructs a kind of machine (the Plot) whose end is in itself, whose automatic result is the arousal and catharsis of the tragic emotions, and in which the audience must discover the meaning of the play, and thereby achieve for itself the tragic catharsis, through a strenuous contemplation of the episodes of the Plot in their relation to each other. The audience is invited not so much to a communion with the poet as to the exhibition of an artifact.
Only in this light is it clear why Aristotle is concerned mainly with the “objects” of imitation, and devotes hardly more than passing attention to those parts of Tragedy by which the poet affects his audience in some direct fashion. Of the two “means” of imitation, Diction and Melody, he discusses at length only Diction, and even here he is more concerned with the syntactical than the poetic functions of language. Spectacle, the only part arising from the “manner” of imitation, he seems often to regard as an accidental and even regrettable constituent.

In the famous opening definition of Tragedy, Aristotle lists Spectacle among its six qualitative parts (Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, and Melody), implying that Spectacle is indeed a functional element, the “manner” of imitation distinctive of Tragedy. Yet from this point on, Aristotle consistently uses the term pejoratively, and treats Spectacle merely as visual embellishment or stage décor. He insists that the tragic catharsis may be achieved without an actual performance of the play, but merely by a recounting of its action, and suggests that Spectacle is more properly the concern of the costume-maker than of the poet. He implies that the need to consider visual effects often proves a burden to the poet, leading him to twist the episodes of the action and thereby to deform the Plot. He advises the poet to visualize his scenes, but only so that he “will devise what is appropriate, and be least likely to overlook incongruities”. And one of the few advantages which he claims for Epic over Tragedy is that Epic is not limited only to those episodes that make a convincing Spectacle.

Conceived simply as a matter of stage fitness, then, Spectacle would appear to be mainly a source of obstacles and incongruities in the making of Plots, and at best only a visual ornament. And if Spectacle is the one and only part arising from the “manner” of imitation, then its “manner” is no longer functional in Tragedy, but accidental and even irrelevant, without work of its own to do. But as I have suggested, Aristotle does not consistently regard Tragedy as a natural object whose form is directly “affective”. He frequently recognizes that to produce his catharsis the poet needs a more direct approach than the Plot alone affords him, that in fact the poet must be rather a busybody in manipulating the emotions of his audience. He is much concerned, for example, with the kinds of tragic deed and the kinds of discovery which will intensify the tragic emotions: the tragic deed must have not only its proper place and its probable connection with the other episodes of the action, it must also be horrible enough to arouse fear. Aristotle worries also about probability. He explains that tragedians often give their characters historical names in order to achieve greater credibility, and he insists that “A likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility.”

Such remarks throughout *The Poetics* provide a context in which it is possible to conceive of Spectacle as a truly functional element. One way, certainly, to make an “impossibility” seem likely is to actualize it on the stage, to present it visually as a *fait accompli*. The episode of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking, for example, might well be unlikely if we did not see it with our own eyes: though the plot of *Macbeth* makes the sleepwalking abstractly conceivable, we are convinced of the probability of this outcome only by the language and by the sight of Lady Macbeth distraught. Her extremity would seem incredible if simply reported by a messenger; nor would our pity and fear for her husband be nearly so intense as they are once we have seen her sleepwalking. No doubt the sleepwalking scene is highly melodramatic, grossly spectacular in Aristotle’s pejorative sense of the term; but its main significance lies in the fact that the sleepwalking is apprehended in the dramatic present rather than recounted from the past, imitated rather than narrated. It is perceived in that mode for which Henry James, talking about the novel, had to invent the term “rendered”. Here Spectacle is a functional element, in that the sense of probability and the arousal of the tragic emotions depend upon the poet's choice of episodes to represent directly rather than to narrate.

On the one occasion when Aristotle speaks directly of the “manner” of imitation rather than Spectacle, it is precisely with this meaning. At the beginning of *The Poetics*, in distinguishing the various arts of imitation, he says:
A third difference in these arts is in the manner in which each kind of object is represented. Given both the same means and the same kind of object for imitation, one may either (1) speak at one moment in narrative and another in an assumed character, as Homer does; or (2) one may remain the same throughout, without any such change; or (3) the imitators may represent the whole story dramatically, as though they were actually doing the things described.4

Here he has clearly in mind that there are functional differences between narrating and representing, though he later forgets this in treating Spectacle merely as visual embellishment. But there is a certain pedantic oversimplification in this passage, which I think is the source of that general ambivalence of conception in The Poetics which I have been describing.

One can hardly think of a novel or epic in which the narrator “remains the same throughout, without any such change”, or of a play in which “the imitators … represent the whole story dramatically.” Even the “dear reader” novelists must resort to rendering in dialogue sometimes, while even the later Henry James must sometimes step out of his “centers of consciousness” and describe Merton Densher ironically as “our hero”. Similarly, it is hard to remember even a play of Ibsen's or Arthur Miller's in which no episodes are narrated rather than rendered. In fact, neither of the last two “manners” of imitation listed by Aristotle is really pure, and one might even place Gorboduc in the second category (narrative), and The Ambassadors in the third (dramatic).

When Aristotle equates Spectacle with “manner” he assumes that the choice whether to narrate or to represent the entire action is made irrevocably when the poet decides which genre to practice: narration is proper to Epic (though he perceives that sometimes Epic employs a mixed mode), representation to Tragedy. He does not anticipate that the tragic poet, having already chosen which episodes to put into his Plot, is not obliged to put every one of them onto the stage, but still must choose which to narrate and which to render. Tragedy may also employ a mixed mode, so that when the poet chooses whether to narrate or render a particular episode, his purpose is not merely visual ornamentation, but to reveal Thought, Character, and Action, to arouse the tragic emotions, and to work up the sense of probability. And just because such purposes may be well served by the poet's choice of what his audience should see, it seems entirely possible that even the visual fireworks of which Aristotle is contemptuous may be important to Tragedy. Since both meanings of “manner”; as the art of rendering and the art of stage ornamentation, have a common visual basis, both might have a truly functional significance. To test and establish the significance of both, I now turn to Macbeth.

The conception of Macbeth as a genuine tragic hero rather than a conventional villain is perhaps nowhere more justified than by an examination of Shakespeare's choice of episodes to render rather than narrate, and of the sequence in which to render them. Mr. Booth's argument demonstrates how Shakespeare's great tact in this matter consistently prevents the alienation of our sympathies from Macbeth: in none of the play's three great acts of violence is Macbeth himself seen committing the crime, the effect of which is to forestall our indignation, though certainly not to absolve him of guilt. What we do see following each murder is the almost unbearable suffering of Macbeth and his wife, which in Macbeth's case at least is intensified by explicit recognition of his guilt: after Duncan's murder, Macbeth's furtive pacing in the hall and his anguished speeches; after Banquo's murder, Macbeth's engagement with the ghost at the shattered ritual of the banquet; and Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking following the murder of Lady Macduff. In each case, by the choice and sequence of scenes rendered, Shakespeare draws our attention from the crime's effect on its victim to its effect on its perpetrator.5

In all of these scenes, of course, the language is important: in the sleepwalking scene we must hear “Out, damned spot!” in order to apprehend fully Lady Macbeth's agitation. But even without the words we see her agitation, and it makes all the difference that now we see her agitation when we did not see Duncan's. When we look over Macbeth's cringing shoulder at the ghost of Banquo, we hardly need the words at all.
The witches are the most spectacular figures in the play, and, in both Aristotelian senses of “Spectacle”, they offer the most striking visual evidence against regarding Macbeth as a villain. They appear only four times during the play, but twice in the first three scenes. In the play's first scene they are given the impressive place of the prologue, but not for the sake of the dozen lines which they speak among themselves. Their action is spectacular in Aristotle's pejorative sense of visual embellishment, in that it is almost wholly choreographic and dazzling to our sight. But it is also spectacular in the functional sense, in that the episode is dramatically rendered, and rendered before the episode in which Macbeth himself meets the witches. Merely to see the witches is to recognize in them an enormous power, a power not to determine a man's fate, but to stir his imagination, to influence choices for which he himself must finally be held responsible. And Shakespeare offers the audience its own visual transaction with the witches at the beginning precisely so that later we may view Macbeth's response to them with first-hand knowledge. In putting the witches directly before us, he informs us that even right-thinking men, even we ourselves, are susceptible to their influence. He deprives us not of the moral grounds, but of the smug conviction out of which we might otherwise be willing to condemn Macbeth for believing in them. We learn “fear for one like ourselves”, and how extraordinarily difficult it would be for even a good man to turn to the witches a deaf ear.

In performing the prologue, the witches play a role comparable to that of the chorus in classical drama, which represents a traditional moral community whose health is at stake in the career of the protagonist. Even an audience inexperienced in classical drama recognizes in the first scene of Macbeth that it is the community of Satan whose continuance is here to be challenged, and readily infers that any community represented by the witches is threatened not by men in whom crime is habitual, but only by good men who might prove incorruptible. For the witches to play for the soul of a villain would be merely to exhibit their impotence.

If Macbeth is not a villain, still he is but imperfectly exalted. Though Shakespeare deftly manipulates his rendering in order to emphasize Macbeth's suffering and to mask his depravity, he carefully distinguishes between Macbeth's suffering and his virtue, and at the beginning he chooses to narrate rather than render episodes which would make us strongly aware of Macbeth's manliness and courage. Instead of beginning with a battle scene in which Macbeth distinguishes himself before our eyes, he puts the report of Macbeth's heroism into the mouth of the bleeding sergeant. He desires that we shall not think Macbeth “preeminently noble” in any case, but especially that as we see Macbeth's deterioration we shall not be embarrassed by a highly deferential attitude toward him. For the same reason, in I.iii, Macbeth is named Thane of Cawdor privately by the messengers Ross and Angus rather than in the public ceremony of the very next scene, where the King names Malcolm heir to the throne. On that occasion Macbeth stands to one side, having first been thanked by Duncan, to make way for the larger state business at hand. We learn just enough of Macbeth's bravery and status to make his coming deterioration significant, but nothing which would make improbable the fall of too noble a man or wholly alienate us from Macbeth when he launches upon violence.

At the end of the play Shakespeare's choice of episodes to render is calculated to have just the reverse effect. Having witnessed the full course of degeneration, now the audience needs to be rescued from too strong a revulsion from Macbeth the murderer. Now Shakespeare puts before our eyes Macbeth's courage in facing overwhelming military odds. In a group of short scenes in the fifth act he shows the matching of forces with extraordinary sensitivity to the visual effects of representation. In one series of scenes (V.ii, V.iv, and V.vi) we see the enemy army first small and stationary, then marching and swelled by the addition of the English force, and finally marching camouflaged by the boughs gathered from Birnam Wood. In the alternate scenes (V.iii and V.v) we see first Macbeth putting on his armor alone, as if to do battle single-handedly, and then joined by soldiers, but in a defensive stance within the castle. The sense of Macbeth's disadvantage is overpowering, and the moral imagination is superseded by the visual: when we see Macbeth finally as the underdog we do not excuse his crimes, but we sympathize with him in spite of them.

This redemption of Macbeth continues in the battle scenes which follow. Careful as he was not to represent directly Macbeth's valor in the first act, Shakespeare trails him around the battlefield in the last act. Now that
Birnam Wood and Macduff have fulfilled the witches' prophecies, Macbeth has good reason to cease fighting and in effect commit suicide. Yet he does not flinch, and still commands enough strength and cunning to kill a valiant younger man, Siward's son. We last see him joined with Macduff in a struggle the adverse outcome of which we have good reason to believe occurs offstage.\(^6\) If that is true, then nothing in these final scenes more clearly shows Macbeth's heroism and even glory than Macbeth's killing Young Siward on the stage and Macduff's killing Macbeth offstage. The visible evidence of Macbeth's bravery in the face of a great disadvantage has been so impressive that now to see his physical humiliation would inopportunely outrage us against his enemies. Always Shakespeare's choice of episodes to render maintains a double attitude toward Macbeth: in the first act "noble Macbeth" is not advertised to our sight, so that later we may accept his brutality; and in the last act the valor of "this dead butcher" is put visibly before us, so that we will not be alienated from him.

Shakespeare is even more concerned with the problem of representation in his attempt to show a process of deterioration in the sequence of murders for which Macbeth is responsible. Actually the murder of Duncan is the most reprehensible of the three, but nevertheless it must come first. Again Shakespeare must maintain a double attitude and make the last of the three murders more wanton though less culpable than the killing of one's king, kinsman, and guest. He accomplishes this brilliantly, though not entirely by the visual effects of representation. Coming directly after Macbeth's first meeting with the witches and the revelation of his wife's pernicious influence upon him, the murder of Duncan is strongly if not justly motivated. But the murder of Lady Macduff and her son is gratuitous. It signifies nothing even to Macbeth. Part of a king's burden, after all, is the risk of assassination, and an audience needs little sophistication momentarily to withhold its outrage from the murderer of a king. But even the cynic might be shocked at the senseless murder of women and children.

Mr. Booth points out that the presentation of Duncan's murder, which occurs offstage to a man who has never been seen in a domestic relation like Lady Macduff's with her son, is designed to impress us abstractly with the severity of the crime, but not to evoke our sympathy for its victim.\(^7\) Furthermore, the scenes which precede and follow Duncan's murder also emphasize only the ethical implications of the crime. In I. vi, Shakespeare devotes a separate scene to Lady Macbeth's welcoming Duncan to Inverness, in which we are shown not an intimate personal relationship, but the ritual of hospitality, a visual embodiment of the obligation which Macbeth is to violate. Similarly, the appearance of the drunken porter immediately after the murder is a visual and ghoulish result of Macbeth's severing the great chain of being. Again it is the seriousness of the crime and not the character of its victim which is emphasized.

On the other hand, the staging of Lady Macduff's murder evokes overwhelming sympathy for the victims themselves. The helpless child is killed onstage, after a domestic episode which aroused our pity for him, and the scene ends with Lady Macduff running from her murderer. The visual details show the crime not in its abstract relation to a code, but as the despicable act of a depraved man. Yet in the delicate balancing of visual details, Macbeth does not commit this murder personally, so that we may fully witness his deterioration without experiencing a revulsion from him.\(^8\) The evidence of deterioration is in the visual contrast between Duncan's murder and Lady Macduff's.

I have been speaking of "manner" in Macbeth conceived as the art of rendering. But even in the use of visual trappings and machinery, to which Aristotle pejoratively applies the term "Spectacle", Macbeth is Shakespeare's most flamboyant play. Again and again in the rich visual surface of the play—witches replete with cauldron and apparitions, the ghost of Banquo, Birnam Wood moving, Macbeth's head on a pike—Shakespeare uses Spectacle in precisely that manner of which Aristotle is contemptuous.

Yet this machinery seems indispensable to show Macbeth's degeneration. It was a fashion of nineteenth-century criticism to suppose that the witches objectify Macbeth's inner state, and especially the base motives for his action. In the contrast between Macbeth's and Banquo's first responses to the witches, for
example, it is clear that Macbeth already had contemplated the career which the witches suggest to him. But many of the spectacular devices—the moving of Birnam Wood, for example—are not directly related to Macbeth's inner state, and most of them come late in the play, after he has fully expressed his motives. Beginning with the banquet scene, the play becomes nakedly spectacular in order to exhibit not Macbeth's motives or responses, but the irrational and hallucinatory world which his earlier conduct now forces him to inhabit, a world in which Lady Macduff's murder is not exceptional. Banquo's ghost, the apparitions, the moving wood, and the severed head are all a measure of Macbeth's fall. They show his membership in a community which is inexpressible in words, the Satanic community of the prologue to the play.

The final predominance of this dark atmosphere completes a pattern of Spectacle which has been developed throughout the play, a pattern which exhibits the collapse of rationality both in the external world and in the character of Macbeth. We know how completely the Elizabethans identified the fall of princes with the collapse of communities, and that almost invariably the imitation of such an action employed stock devices like the Machiavel. A set of court scenes and funeral processions could be seen almost daily in some London theater, so that long before Macbeth such episodes ceased to be merely diverting. The playgoers had seen them in other plays, and many were watching the present play for the second or third time. What they now wished to achieve for themselves is what Mr. Ferguson has elsewhere called the “mimetic perception of action”.

For such an audience the significance of the court scenes in Macbeth would lie in what they have in common with dozens of court scenes from other plays: to suggest in ritual form that the destiny of a community, and by analogy of all mankind, is here at stake. The first court scene, I.iv, begins with an assembling, and throughout the scene Duncan is surrounded by his court. The action moves swiftly to its climax in the gesture by which Duncan names Malcolm heir, while Macbeth stands aside. Perhaps we cannot know without words precisely what honor Duncan confers upon Malcolm. But we are aware, from the processional atmosphere, from the awe and approval which the assembly displays, that Duncan's gesture is a ceremonial proclamation of health and order. Here as in the opening of King Lear, we are invited to celebrate a rational order, the oneness of the kingdom and of all mankind.

In the second court scene, III.i, all this reassuring ceremony is missing. The scene opens with a disbanding of the court. Macbeth as king, stripped of his ceremonial dignity, paces the floor talking to himself. The climax is reached in the conspiratorial huddle where he engages Banquo's assassins, an unceremonious action of which the court-chorus must be kept ignorant. The royal gesture which was public and awesome in the first scene is here private and sinister. We see at once the deterioration in Macbeth and in the royal office.

This deterioration is completed in the banquet scene, III.iv. Here the miming shows not simply that the rituals of hospitality and kingship have been fragmented, but that rational discourse is no longer possible. We see three simultaneous conversations, in each of which the principal interlocutors are oblivious to the presence of others. Macbeth is transfixed by the ghost, and the others indicate that they are unaware of the ghost's presence and cannot participate in Macbeth's experience. We see Lady Macbeth pull her husband aside and speak to him out of the others' hearing. Finally Lady Macbeth speaks to the company even while Macbeth is speaking to the ghost. The visual effect is surrealistic, with everybody speaking not to but past one another. We see the failure of even the most essential domestic ritual, with Macbeth finally outside the company of men.

Now the shattered ritual of the state is replaced by the choreography of the weird sisters, and Macbeth is drawn swiftly into a maelstrom filled with fenny snake fillets, armed hands, bloody children, and Birnam Wood moving. Almost literally Macbeth and the witches dance their way through the last two acts. Witless motion must now supersede speech and rational action, since the extent of Macbeth's degeneration is now beyond words and expressible only in the highly spectacular devices of the end of the play. Our feelings of fear especially are aroused by the sight of Macbeth now putting himself irrevocably into the witches' grip.
until nothing less spectacular than the parading about of Macbeth's head can provide a sufficient catharsis.

Only by this heavy reliance on visual trappings at the end of the play does Shakespeare exhibit in detail the degeneration of a hero with whom he means us to be consistently sympathetic. Yet where patterns of ritual and dance define rather than ornament the action, as they do at the end of Macbeth, Spectacle really usurps the function of Plot, and shows what Aristotle considers the worse and not the better poet. And for just a minute before we accuse Aristotle of a pedantic neglect of visual embellishment, we must recognize that there is something irregular in the spectacular ending of Macbeth. The psychological intensity of the first part of the play is not sustained after the banquet scene, precisely when the stage becomes crowded with visual devices. The ending seems too fully determined beforehand, and our attention is shifted from the hero's mind to the external events of his waning life.

To recognize this, however, is not to concede a lapse in Shakespeare's technique, for the shift in focus is essential to his purpose. The Spectacle of the end of the play keeps us outside the mind of Macbeth, denies us any glimpse of that final dignity and repose which make the deaths of Othello and Lear so richly satisfying, because to a mind destroyed such dignity and repose are impossible. Othello collapses, Lear goes mad, but the tragic experience makes them whole. In Macbeth we bear painful witness to a whole shattered, and while he never lets us forget what he was, his essential action is to “rend and deracinate”, until he has left us hardly more of himself than is visible. The “tomorrow” speech is great poetry partly because it exhibits a ruined spirit, whose characteristic quality is found earlier, in the speeches which precede and follow the murder of Duncan. When one reaches the mindless state reflected by that speech, there is nothing left of life but the witches' dance.

Hence we are justified in wishing Aristotle more inclusive, and in suggesting that “manner” in both its senses may truly be one of the determinative constituents of Tragedy. For we recognize that at least in a tragedy like Macbeth, both the choice of episodes to render and the visual machinery which is intrinsic to the rendering are indispensable to show the full extent of deterioration and to arouse the feelings of pity and fear which result from that perception. We do not finally think of Macbeth as a villain whom we are well rid of, but neither do we feel the effect of the play diminished when Spectacle carries the burden of Plot. We recognize that this usurpation is necessary, that the degenerative tragedy must end in a wild spectacle that signifies merely nothing.

Notes

4. Poetics, Ch. 3, 1456-457.
5. Booth, pp. 21-23. An exception, of course, is the murder of Lady Macduff's child, which I try to account for later. It should also be remarked that if from the Aristotelian point of view the choice of episodes to render is part of the Spectacle, the choice of a sequence in which to render them is strictly speaking a function of the Plot.
6. The stage direction in the Folio has Macbeth and Macduff leave the stage fighting, but come back onstage for the killing of Macbeth. Many editors correct the Folio, on the grounds that it would be terribly awkward to have Macbeth killed onstage and then dragged off to be beheaded in the midst of the ongoing action. My interpretation here might be offered as additional grounds for this correction.
Criticism: Character Studies: Michael Long (essay date 1989)


[In the following essay, Long evaluates Macbeth as an archetypal man of action and analyzes his crimes in relation to other literary depictions of primal destruction and Christian redemption.]

**BLOODY EXECUTION**

Shakespeare often begins a tragedy with somebody's description of the protagonist before he comes on stage. We hear of Marcius as 'chief enemy to the people' before he bursts in full of fury. We hear of the 'good and gracious' Timon before he sweeps on distributing largesse. We hear of Antony falling into 'dotage' and then the great lover strolls on in leisureed magnificence. We hear whispers of Lear's odd shifts of favour and then he comes on in state to express his 'darker purpose'. And we are told that Othello is a vainglorious soldier full of 'bombast circumstance', as well as a lascivious, black lover who has stolen a white women, before the man himself appears as if to answer these nasty charges. The simple technique creates expectation. It also tells an audience whom to watch, and why.

Macbeth's introduction comes from the wounded Sergeant in I.ii. The Sergeant is a fine, epic soldier with a bent for vivid rhetoric, and the picture he paints is memorable. He evokes the rebel Macdonwald with the 'multiplying villanies of nature' swarming on him like flies on a carcase surrounded by an equally swarming horde of 'kerns and gallowglasses' drummed up for his cause in the Western Isles, and then he describes the tremendous irruption of Macbeth into these swirls of movement, cutting his way to the centre of things to dominate them with his deeds and his presence:

brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name—

Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel
Which smok'd with bloody execution,
Like valour's minion, carv'd out his passage
Till he fac'd the slave;
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chaps,
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

(I.ii. 16-23)

This 'bloody execution' sounds brutal; but the epic rhetoric also makes it sound magnificent.

The Macbeth we later meet does not disappoint the expectations raised by this dramatic opening account of him. He is brutal, but he has his epic magnificence too, and one of his chief roles is to be the sort of decisive doer, intervener or irruptive agent whom the Sergeant describes. The Sergeant makes us think about violent action, but also about action in itself, as he pictures Macbeth's terrible, thrilling intervention into things and his ruthless domination of the field. This will be a play about a man who does, and about the momentous deed that he does. It will be a play about doing, and about that spectacular, frightening spirit of 'bloody execution'.

Macbeth cannot lie passive like Duncan ‘shut up in measureless content’, nor stand like Banquo ‘in the great hand of God’, waiting patiently for the unravelling of destiny. They may live in tranquillity at the slow pace of unfolding events, as the martlets do, suspended in their airy bed where ‘the heaven's breath / Smells wooingly’, but the restless Macbeth must be up and doing. Early on he hopes that chance may crown him,
‘without my stir’, but he soon realises that it will not. He must stir, and act, and thus confront the fatality of individual deeds.

Shakespeare makes this sense of the existential fatality of action resonate powerfully in the play, and his principal method for doing so is extraordinarily simple. *Macbeth* activates every possible resonance of the verb ‘to do’. ‘Do’, ‘did’, ‘done’, and the cognate noun ‘deed’, are words stirred into vivid life by an imagination dwelling profoundly on the fatal business of ‘bloody execution’, or indeed any kind of execution. They carry the play’s cogent exploration of what it is to be a separate, acting individual rather than an unperturbed particle of social acquiescence or of the breath of nature's quiet.

They are aided in this by another word, almost as simple, and allied both conceptually and onomatopoeically with ‘do’ and ‘deed’. This is the verb ‘to dare’, upon which the play also dwells to wonderful effect. Macbeth does. Macbeth dares to do. These simple words are made to yield every gram of their poetic and philosophical potential.

**ACT I: ‘IF IT WERE DONE WHEN 'TIS DONE’**

In I.iii Macbeth entertains his hope that things might happen ‘without my stir’. But in the next scene Duncan names Malcolm as his heir, Macbeth’s fond hopes die, and his imagination turns to the mechanisms whereby desires become deeds. He will have to stir, to ‘o'erleap’ the obstacle in his path, and he will have to act, hidden guiltily from the lights of the natural world:

> Let not light see my black and deep desires.  
  (I.v. 50-1)

Banquo and the king stand before him talking pleasurably and easefully. They are still in the old, quiet world, but Macbeth has moved to another realm. This is the start of his career as an existential agent, and the start of the formidable poetic career of the verb ‘to do’:

> Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.  
  (I.v. 52-3)

In the next scene, when his wife receives his letter and the witches’ poison starts to course through her veins, the keywords sound again in juggling conjuration:

> Thou'dst have, great Glamis, that which cries  
  ‘Thus thou must do’ if thou have it;  
  And that which rather thou dost fear to do  
  Than wishest should be undone.  
  (I.v. 19-22)

Lady Macbeth conceives of herself as a natural doer, made for ‘business’ and ‘dispatch’, but we shall see how the stresses of the interventionist role will be too much for her. Macbeth's greater trepidation is well placed. It is more appropriate to the terrors attendant upon the business of doing, and to the explosive powers which lie within these fascinating words.
In the last scene of Act I the keywords come thick and fast. Macbeth wrestles with his fears and desires, and the keywords flicker hypnotically before his captivated eyes:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly.

(I.vii. 1-2)

They draw him on with the idea of decisive, ‘be-all and end-all’ action. Then comes a counter-movement, equally strong, where he remembers the great taboos which speak ‘against the deed’ and shrinks in anticipation of the outrage which will be felt when ‘the horrid deed’ is revealed.

Then his wife chides him for his doubter’s sense of ‘I dare not’, and he seizes on that word too and squeezes it tightly:

I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.

(I.vii. 46-7)

The word ‘man’ has joined the wrestling knot of words, and Lady Macbeth keeps it there to shame him into action:

When you durst do it, then you were a man.

(I.vii. 49)

By the end of the scene Macbeth is resolved, and a dark, subdued hymn to doing sounds beneath the couple's dialogue. Lady Macbeth talks horribly of an outrageous licence to do what one will:

What cannot you and I perform upon
Th’ unguarded Duncan?

(I.vii. 69-70)

Macbeth hits on the clever idea of incriminating the grooms so that people will think ‘they have don’t’, and Lady Macbeth chimes excitedly back that there will be none who ‘dares receive it other’. They chant together, work up their courage, and bring Macbeth to readiness for ‘this terrible feat’.

ACT II: ‘I HAVE DONE THE DEED’

As Act II opens, the incantations stop while Banquo evokes the magically profound ‘pleasure’ and ‘content’ of Duncan’s soul, but after this beautiful linguistic interlude the phantom dagger appears. It lures on the ‘heat-oppressed brain’ of Macbeth, rekindles ‘the heat of deeds’ and renews the fatal drive to action: ‘I go, and it is done.’

In II.ii the awesome words are whispered in terror in the dark. Lady Macbeth fears the attempt has been bungled (‘tis not done’), and dwells on the awful irony whereby they might be confounded not by doing ‘the deed’ but by failing to do it. She too is now more alert to the scale of what is involved, increasing the weight on the key verb by using it in another momentous context:
My father as he slept, I had done't.

(II.ii. 12-13)

By the time the crime is accomplished, the collocation of verb and noun is enough to sound the depths of irrevocability: ‘I have done the deed.’

The now appalling noun ‘deed(s)’ shudders in their minds three more times in the scene (‘these deeds’, ‘this deed’, ‘my deed’); and in the midst of them Macbeth finds another memorable collocation, linking doing with daring in an expression of the utmost horror:

I am afraid to think what I have done; Look on't again I dare not.

(II.ii. 51-2)

Such simple words will never be simple again.

After this great scene Shakespeare lets the words go for a while, before bringing them back to close the act. In II.iv, with the Old Man's talk of ‘the deed that's done’, Ross's reference to ‘this more than bloody deed’ and Macduff's mention simply of ‘the deed’, we hear uneasy speakers probe the keywords suspiciously. They keep what has happened at arm's length by referring to it darkly as ‘the deed’, as if they wanted to keep their eyes averted from some abomination or their persons out of striking distance of it.

The atmosphere of their talk makes Macbeth's deed of destruction seem like the deed of Adam and Eve. All nature has fallen into darkness and savagery as a result of it. Macduff already knows that Ross will not see things ‘well done’ at Macbeth's coronation. From such catastrophe recovery cannot be so quick, for Macbeth has made ‘a breach in nature’ with his tremendous intervention into the settled state of things, and these three are now living amidst the ‘ruin’ which, as in Eden, gained its ‘wasteful entrance’ when that breach was made.

ACT III: ‘A DEED OF DREADFUL NOTE’

But deeds lead to deeds and in Act III the words return, with the Second Murderer ‘reckless what I do’ and Macbeth determined that his new deed, the killing of Banquo, ‘must be done tonight’. In III.ii Lady Macbeth tries to kill the words off with the finality of her statement that ‘what's done is done’, but it will be a long time yet before the terrible energy of these words has run down. Macbeth, better apprised than his wife of the enormity of what they have unloosed, promises to keep up with the race of things:

A deed of dreadful note,

(III.ii. 43-4)

while his bewildered wife asks him ‘what's to be done?’; but he, as if sensing her inability to stay the course on which they are now set, decides to keep his doings to himself:

Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,
Till thou applaud the deed.

(III.ii. 45-6)
There is now a hardening in Macbeth. The fateful words no longer frighten him so much. He begins to use them with perceptible relish, sensing their menace and less awed than he was. That ‘dearest chuck’ is gross and sinister in a way that is new; and also new are some tellingly banal uses of the keywords in the next two scenes. In III.iii the murderers banalise the words with shop-talk about ‘what we have to do’ and the report they will deliver on ‘how much is done’, and in III.iv there is a thuggery in their professional talk of cutting throats (“that I did for him”). Macbeth seems to catch this thuggish note from them like a contagion, hoping that they not only cut Banquo’s throat but also ‘did the like’ for Fleance, and calling one of them a ‘nonpareil’ among men ‘if thou didst it’. At some level he seems to be enjoying this new brashness, as if it were man’s talk for which his ‘dearest chuck’ is unfitted.

But he loses his swagger when the ghost appears to shake his ‘gory locks’ at him. The keywords are now used to cry helplessly ‘which of you have done this?’ and to disavow the role of agent altogether: ‘thou can’st not say I did it.’ To fight back this terror he will need the talismanic verb ‘to dare’. He will need to claim that he dare look on that

Which might appal the devil

(III.iv. 58-9)

and to face down the charge of cowardice with cries of ‘what man dare, I dare’ and ‘dare me to the desert’. These are cries that come swirling out of a mind in panic, until at last he regains some shreds of composure, enabling him to return to things that ‘must be acted’, and to the accent of menace: ‘we are yet but young in deed’.

**ACT IV: ‘A DEED WITHOUT A NAME’**

To make himself less ‘young in deed’ in Act IV he returns to the witches, who were the original inspiration for the impulse to do. As he sets foot in their den he cries out with the verb: ‘what is’t you do?’, and they chant back the noun as if in ritual response: ‘a deed without a name’.

While Duncan’s court lived at the pace of acquiescence and unassertiveness, this den is the holy place of a religion of deeds. It is where Macbeth goes for inspiration when his heart ‘throbs to know’ and when, unable to wait upon the quiet rhythms of nature’s evolutions, he is prepared to see

Of nature's germens tumble all together,
Even till destruction sicken

(IV.i. 58-60)

to satisfy his restless desire. He gets his inspiration. He emerges from the ordeal nerved again, resolved to kill for a third time and with the keywords on his lips:

The flighty purpose never is o'ertook
Unless the deed go with it …

(IV.i. 145-6)

To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done …

(IV.i. 148-9)
This deed I'll do.

(IV.i. 153-4)

**ACT V: ‘LITTLE IS TO DO’**

The deed he does is the killing of Macduff's wife and children, and after it Shakespeare leaves the idea of doing alone, as if, after such an outrage, it could now have no further moral or poetic content. The remainder of Macbeth's life is led in Act V within the fortress of Dunsinane, where, incapable of any more doing, he paces out the long, halting soliloquy of his despair, interspersed with outbursts of rage against puny people like servants, unwilling followers, a messenger and ‘the boy Malcolm’. It is the nadir of the great doer, hemmed in and frustrated in every desire.

Here, as his way of life falls into the sere, there is no further activation of ‘do’ and ‘deed’, and the idea of daring takes on a desperate, last-ditch quality. He is tied to the stake, with only growls of defiance as evidence of his former courage and nerve. We have seen enough of deeds and doers. Doing has turned out merely to be butchery and the compelling rhythms of the keywords have run down.

As the rhythms of doing fade, a different rhythm, not felt since Duncan was alive, brings time round in its cycle again to make the autumnal Macbeth ‘ripe for shaking’. His fall does not feel like an act performed by men, attributable to human agency. It happens when the time is ripe, in accordance with some internal logic in events which is not subject to will and intervention. We wait until the long night of his deed-filled tyranny at last ‘finds the day’ and then we find the fortified castle being ‘gently rendered’ to beautifully unurgent men.

In harmony with the ease and gentleness of that phrase come two magnificent usages of the keywords which help slow the play to a less cruel pace. The first comes from Macduff, who has no quarrel with anybody except Macbeth and who, rather than fight against men innocently embroiled in the tyrant's career, would prefer to leave his sword ‘undeeded’. The second comes from Old Siward, inviting Malcolm simply to walk into the castle of Dunsinane, crossing its threshold effortlessly since, miraculously, ‘little is to do’. The tenor of these phrases is relievingly unassertive, as if what were occurring involved no more than acquiescence in the eternal cycles of things.

The human world comes back into contact with an inner, pre-conscious rhythm. Green branches bring the forest's silence and fertility back into human society and the young king promises that ‘what's more to do’ will, as if in response to the forest's presence, be 'planted newly with the time’. Things will be done according to the old, quiet rhythm of things, ‘in measure, time, and place’, with no doing, daring, ‘bloody execution’ or ‘dispatch’ disrupting the free-flowing ‘grace of Grace’. We have not heard such sustained sounds of leisure and peace since Duncan was alive, or since Macbeth started to conjure the turbulent life out of dangerous words, or since the witches wound up the infernal plot with that frantic cry which has proved to be so laden with import:

I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.

(Liii.10)

**PRIMORDIAL CRIMINALS**

In one realm *Macbeth*, deploying these keywords, shows us a great, criminal deed and then a chain of consequential deeds, each as horrible as the last and all leading to destruction. To that extent it contains a simple but extremely powerful moral vision according to which Macbeth is a damned and self-damned
creature, ‘black Macbeth’ as Malcolm calls him, the ‘butcher’ with a ‘fiendlike queen’ at whose fall, in Johnson's words, ‘every reader rejoices’.

But there is another realm to the play, and another effect produced by its concentration on doing and daring. In this realm the keywords make us think not of these particular deeds but of deeds and doing in general, and here there is something about Macbeth which is beyond the range of the judgmental certitude expressed alike by Malcolm and Dr Johnson. In this metaphysically complex part of the play there is something fatal, doomed, but heroic about Macbeth, and something which makes him not the disruptive outsider of whom the world is well rid but the representative outsider, the outsider such as we all are, the archetypal representative of the fact that, as conscious, acting individuals, not trees of the forest, we cannot simply stand ‘in the hand of the great God’ but are fated to be involved in deeds.

In this respect the play echoes the Christian myth of the Fall. Macbeth and his wife re-enact the deed of Adam and his wife, and they also embody some aspects of Satan. There is a sacred play in Macbeth, dealing with the primal fact of doing and the primal offence of being a doer. But, as is often the way with attempts to tell the Christian story of the Fall, the apparent moral does not entirely survive the story’s telling. The images of the story are apt to speak for themselves, and not always to the same effect as the moral, so that tales of Satan, Adam and Eve in revolt against God tend to be knotty. We are apt to see inalienable aspects of ourselves in these original sinners, and their fate represents to us tragic things about an imperfect world rather than simple, revelatory things about disobedience. We take to some extent the criminals' part, so that Malcolm's simple words are not quite enough to sum up what we feel about their careers.

In this sacred play of the primordial crime the hero's deeds are not only criminal. The doer, with his interventionist audacity, is a much more widely representative man, gifted and cursed with the human attributes of agency and consciousness. He has courage, individual consciousness, and will-power, and in his inability to acquiesce patiently in the primal order of things we sense a strong, restless energy which is compelling. He is still a terrifying criminal who spreads death and destruction about him. But there are aspects of his being to which we respond because, for better or for worse, they seem intrinsic to the business of being human. In the disturbing, tragic figure of the primordial criminal there is something which draws our empathy, something which Wilbur Sanders, in his powerful, Nietzschean reading of the play, calls a ‘compelling energy of defiance’. This elevates him above butchery, and takes him metaphysically out of range of simple verdicts.

MILTON'S SATAN

This is why Milton's Satan, creator of the first breach in the Christian cosmos, owes so much to Macbeth. Milton once considered tackling Macbeth as a dramatic subject, and in a sense he did tackle it when he created the Satan of Paradise Lost. For Milton's Satan shares with Macbeth the paradoxical mixture of criminality and greatness, and this mixture makes them complex and difficult in similar ways. They both exhibit heroic nerve and unnerved despair. They both seem full of power and, almost at the same time, quite powerless. They can seem huge and menacing or pitifully puny. Sometimes they seem noble, sometimes contemptible.

As we read Paradise Lost we are often reminded of Macbeth and, as with Shakespeare's hero, we are often drawn in sympathy to Satan's side as he fights his doomed, ridiculous, magnificent battles with God. Both heroes arouse the same contradictory feelings about a destructive criminality which none the less compels some sort of admiration, and both arouse, very strongly, the same kind of pity. Macbeth looks at himself and his derelict life and decides that honour, love and friendship are things ‘I must not look to have’, while Satan looks at Eden or the unfallen Eve and, in the great soliloquies of his misery, thinks of everything he has lost and everything he has become:

Ay me, they little know
How dearly I abide that boast so vain,
Under what torments inwardly I groan;
While they adore me on the throne of hell,
With diadem and sceptre high advanced
The lower still I fall, only supreme
In misery.

*(Paradise Lost, IV 86-92)*

The notes struck are very similar and the intense sympathy called up by each character is not to be denied. It tells us how far the living stories and characters take us from any simple judgement.

Milton is not, in Blake's words, 'of the Devil's party without knowing it', but he is notoriously restless with his myth, and the restlessness is creative. The author of *Macbeth* cannot be called restless, for the drama is of such limpidity that one cannot imagine a critic thinking its creator was of any party 'without knowing it'. But the complexities and tensions in *Macbeth* do none the less serve to draw the play away from its powerful status as an account of evil and destruction and towards the concerns of a different, later world, less Christian and less assured, where, in a different metaphysic, the doing of deeds is fascinatingly problematic. *Macbeth* has its Christian, traditional and even archaic side, but within its traditional frame and alongside its traditional content, there also lie other intuitions, modern and intractable, which give it life as a forward-looking rather than a backward-looking text. Alongside the radiant, Christian assurance and optimism of the play, there are endlessly dark, pessimistic intuitions of the criminal but heroic nature of all human doing or agency; and in the world of Romanticism, which this part of *Macbeth* foreshadows, fully foregrounded contemplation of the heroic criminal became one of the mainstays of tragic thought.

**EXCURSUS 1: FROM MACBETH FORWARD—ROMANTIC SINNERS**

A brief, introductory book like this should perhaps not digress too far into the difficult, speculative and slightly remote contexts of later art which contemplation of *Macbeth* none the less calls up to a modern reader; but a work of literature so immense in import cannot but stretch the mind that tries to comprehend it, so that forays and excursions beyond the boundaries of the play itself are sponsored by it, just as legitimately as close, exclusive scrutiny of its own details. Such forays into later art might set one thinking about Macbeth in relation to figures like Prometheus and Faust, by whose audacity as doers of deeds Romantic artists were repeatedly fascinated. They might set one thinking about him in relation to Melville's Captain Ahab, in *Moby-Dick*, whose black, destructive rage against a natural world he cannot subdue is as compelling as it is horrible and as daring as it is pointless. They might set one thinking about Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, as doomed by a single deed of murder as Macbeth, as criminally embroiled in violations of the inviolable, and as obscurely magnificent in his journey to the abysses of nowhere, where even the all-present God of Coleridge's Christianity is blasphemously absent.

In this later world, the greatest drama is not however to be found in Faust plays or Prometheus plays. The great drama of the world towards which *Macbeth's* modern subtexts draw us is the music drama. Even in comedy, such music drama, in the shape of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, gave life to a figure whose compellingly unconditional energy, self-sponsored and unratifiable by any imaginable human morality, leagues him with the violators and extremists of what is normally a tragic vision; but for the greatest tragic exploration of audacious, criminal and wanton violation, committed at the extreme edge of the possible, we must turn to Wagner, to find, in *The Ring of the Nibelung*, primordial offences against the sacred quiet of the world which relate fascinatingly to the 'deed' of Macbeth that put 'a breach in nature'.

There are two breakers of the primal quiet in *The Ring*. The first is Wotan who, as the Norns narrate in the Prelude to the last of the cycle's four operas, *Götterdämmerung*, set going the long chain of fatal deeds and offences with which *The Ring* is concerned. In the quiet of the primeval earth he stood out as ‘ein kühner
Gott’, ‘a bold god’, and in his temerity he was ready to pay the required price of mutilation of his physical-spiritual self in order to get the power for which he lusted. He was ready to sacrifice one of his eyes, savaging himself as he savaged nature by tearing a branch from the great ash tree and leaving the sources of life to wither.

The second bold disrupter is Alberich. In a kind of reenactment of Wotan's original deed, further down the line of pollution in the dramatic present of The Ring rather than its narrated past, Alberich too acts boldly: ‘Alberich zauderte nicht’, ‘Alberich did not hesitate’. He too is ready to pay in a different kind of self-mutilation, by forswearing love, and he too savages nature by tearing the gold from the rocks of the Rhine and plunging its waters into darkness.

They are both, like Macbeth, bold doers and interveners. They are immensely powerful in will, doggedly resourceful in pursuit of their aims, and capable of sustaining the resulting loneliness. Wotan may be the Alberich of light, ‘Licht-Alberich’, whose despotism is more or less benevolent and who believes in law, while Alberich is the Alberich of blackness, ‘Schwarz-Alberich’, who is utterly malevolent and who believes in slave-driving and humiliation. There is an opposition between ‘Schwarz’ and ‘Licht’; but both text and music stress the parallels and connections between the two as well as the combat, and thus concentrate attention on the similarities of all beings, of whatever kind and colour, who disrupt the quiet.

Wotan and Alberich, like Macbeth, tear something from the primeval fabric of things and cut into its wholeness. They seek power in separation of themselves from what Wagner wonderfully evokes in the music of the forest and the spring, the music of unpolluted water and streaming light, the music of the vast, effortless, radiant quiet which precedes the interventions of his two fatal Alberichs. In the beginning was not the Word. In the beginning was the forest, with the great ash tree in it, and the Rhine flowing through it lit with gold. These things were then desecrated and polluted by the doers, caused to wither and darken as the lonely quest for power began. The Ring follows the consequences of that quest down the weary but grandiose logic of its unfolding. It contains a great vision of light; and then it contains another, terrible vision of the light seized, and then bent and compacted into the fatal ring of gold while the rest of the world falls into darkness.

That Wotan's mutilation of himself involves the loss of an eye is deeply symbolic, for the brightness of the eye is central to The Ring's evocation of the radiant world of light while the loss of the eye's brightness is a key image of the world's darkening. The Ring is about the loss of the light, and through it runs an imagery of eyes that shine and then darken, linking verbally all the great light passages in Wagner's music.

Wagner's sunlit world of bright rivers, forests and eyes is akin to Macbeth's innocent world of the martlets, the ‘delicate’ air and the green boughs of Birnam wood. The darkness into which it declines is akin to the murk and perversion of Macbeth's ‘fog and filthy air’. His profound, sombre vision of how the human mind and will ineluctably wound and pollute the world is in close congruence with that part of Macbeth which probes the keywords of ‘do’ ‘deed’ and ‘dare’ in its exploration of the nature of human agency. In both works the primal crime is the interventionist deed of a great and reckless creature. In The Ring that deed puts out all sorts of beautiful lights. In Macbeth it palls things in ‘the dunniest smoke of hell’. In both works it is a matter of stabbing at the beautiful, intricate pattern of things and making thereby ‘a breach in nature’.

In Wagner's operas, the primal crime is, as primal crimes are apt to be, of irreversible consequence, for Götterdämmerung, the last of the operas, does not sound like a work in which the world is saved. The Ring is thus sombre in the extreme, charting the irreversible logic of pollution, the unavailing efforts of Wotan to devise a means of recovery and the heart-breaking failure of Siegfried in the impossible task of redeemer assigned to him by the reckless god.

There is an equal sombreness in Macbeth, and an equal, tragic weight in its exploration of the fatality of deeds. It may end in the light, as The Ring does not; but while its closing light is radiant and the redemption it
brings unforced and believable, our memory of the play includes the dark, uncancelled. In so far as it does, we
derive from the play, or from a powerful subtext of it, something like the Wagnerian sense of an irremediable
tragedy in the very fabric of things caused by the fact that deeds are endemic to the business of being alive
and conscious, and yet at the same time are ruinous in their effects.

EXCURSUS 2: FROM MACBETH BACKWARDS—THE CHRISTIAN EPIC

But if Macbeth's subtext prefigures a later world in this way, its main text is still traditional and Christian.
‘Romantic’ element is there, but tracing it involves comparing foregrounded, visible themes from the later
works with material from, so to say, the hinterlands and substrata of Macbeth. Macbeth is, like Wotan, the
bold creature who commits the primal crime, but unlike Wotan he is also a treacherous ‘butcher’, ugly and
black-hearted where Wotan is always capable of creating beauty and splendour, even in the midst of his
ignominy and his reckless selfishness. To pursue such a comparison for too long would thus distort and
glamorise a character who, back in Shakespeare's own world, tends much more to be regarded without
glamour as a traitor and killer.

Shakespeare's world is, as ever, poised on the threshold between the medieval and the modern, and it is time,
after this first excursus, to come back to the play's older, traditional side. In many ways this is one of the most
conservative of Shakespeare's plays. Its sacred aspects, and particularly its sacred conception of kingship, give
it an ancient, tribal quality, with long roots reaching far back into medieval tradition. We must examine these
roots to restore the balance between ancient and modern which the play maintains.

Contrary to widespread belief, Shakespeare is normally sceptical about sacred kingship, and the naïve side of
Macbeth which reveres it is a rarity, if not unique, in his work. In the history plays, Richard II and Henry VI
are the two kings most apt to claim divine sanction, but it does them little good. The plays in which they
appear are more worldly and less innocent than Macbeth. The real problematics of power are to the fore and
no symbolic faith in sacred sanctions and taboos is enough to make anyone look or sound like a king, let alone
make the kingdom work.

Richard aspires to be regarded as a sacred object, the ‘anointed king’, with his ‘anointed body’; but while
Duncan's subjects are sure that their king's body is ‘the Lord's anointed temple’, so that plunging a dagger into
it is sacrilege as well as murder, Richard does not enjoy such unproblematic faith. He lives in a tough world of
real politics where Bolingbroke, the secular, hard-headed usurper, is not so much a violator of the sacred as a
potent, alternative image of what real power consists in, and the play looks calmly at him, biding its time as to
what judgement might be made about the fascinating intrusion of the secular into sacred politics. In the
unproblematic, naïve world of Macbeth, Duncan is never subjected to the mining doubts about the king’s
anointed body which are constantly present in Richard II.

Henry VI is a much finer and more profoundly religious man than the self-regarding Richard. He is gentle,
innocent and pious, the ‘holy Harry’ of popular tradition, moved to tears by the sufferings of his subjects,
while Richard is more taken by the sunset spectacle of his own misfortunes. But that, alas, does not
underwrite holy Harry as king; indeed rather the opposite, for such otherworldliness makes him a liability as
monarch, and peculiarly inept as a warrior-monarch in time of war. At his best he sounds almost like an early
Hamlet, burdened with tormenting insights which more efficient men are spared, and through him
Shakespeare begins to explore the Hamlet-like intuition that the real world is endemically inhospitable to men
of profoundly reflective consciousness.

But Macbeth is different. It alone is not concerned with the problematics of real power. It alone defers to the
sacred-royal imagery and sets upon the stage a living example of the divinity of kingship without subjecting
him to sceptical analysis. ‘The royal play of Macbeth’, as H.N. Paul's study calls it, chooses to eschew
Shakespeare's normal ironies about the anointed king. It remakes the old fiction and gives unique life to its
traditional images. It asks no tormenting questions about the pragmatic efficacy of such a king but uses him instead as a symbol, an inalienable centre of solidarities and loyalties so basic that no questions or problematics arise. Murdering him is like striking at one of the elements of life itself. It is like murdering sleep, chief nourisher at life's feast.

No other Shakespearian king has this sort of status, more like a Prince of God than a leader of men. King Lear, as usual, shares something of this Macbeth quality; but, again as usual, it mingles it with other things and thus complicates what in Macbeth is simple. There is a moment in King Lear when the loyal, traditionally-minded Gloucester is horrified to think that Goneril will ‘rash boarish fangs’ in Lear's ‘anointed flesh’. It is a very Macbeth-like image, with the same sense of sacrilegious savagery as attaches to the ‘gash'd stabs’ in Duncan's body. But even in King Lear the image of the king as divine is far less fundamental than it is in Macbeth, and plenty of problematic questions are asked about the highly fallible individual who is by no means always given sacred overtones.

Macbeth alone guards its naïvety, its visionary simplicity and its radiant perception of a noble, heightened world, utterly distinct from the blackness which Macbeth's crime brings. One fumbles for words, but there is something of what Nietzsche called the ‘Apollonian’ about it, with a constant breath of the eternal in its images of nature, order and pleasure.

In this sense Macbeth is the least modern of all Shakespeare's political plays. Far from sending us forward to Wotan, Alberich, Prometheus, Faust or Giovanni, where a later world gave so much of its imagination to the solitary disrupter, it sends us back to an earlier art and an earlier world, where one of the literatures of the Christian Middle Ages regarded solitary disrupters as criminal deviants and gave its imagination almost exclusively to the settled world they betrayed. There is another, ancient side to Macbeth which relates closely to the primitive epic of the chanson de gestes, the ‘song of deeds’, the ‘song of deeds’, that wonderfully naïve, epic literature of kingship and soldiering which knows nothing of problematics or irony and gives heart-whole commitment to bravery, loyalty, and Christian orthodoxy, all embodied in bright pictures of men who are the warriors of God and his King.

In many ways Duncan's nearest literary relative is the emperor Charlemagne from The Song of Roland, which was written down in twelfth-century France but dates from much earlier. The hieratic, venerable Charlemagne, white-bearded (‘blanche ad la barbe’) and hoary-headed (‘tut flurit le chef’), is Duncan to the life. He is the symbol of all Christendom, and hence, as far as his poet is concerned, of all that is true, beautiful and humane. His warriors serve him, as Banquo and Macbeth serve Duncan in the early scenes of Macbeth, with unquestioning, high-hearted valour. Their world is without hesitation, their poetry without shadows. Bright, tapestry colours sing the deeds of a king and his small, mobile court of warriors. All are untroubled by doubt, as ready as the unpolluted Macbeth to ‘unseam’ a battle opponent ‘from the nave to th' chaps’ and guaranteed like him to be called ‘valiant cousin’ and ‘worthy gentleman’ for so doing.

In literature like this the verse gives its heart entirely to the collective, with their solidarity and loyalty in defence of Christianity and ‘la douz France’. The poetry gives itself without doubt or irony to those who live loyally ‘in the hand of the great God’, and traitors to this world merit no regard at all. Ganelon, the poem's Macbeth-like criminal, is simply the black antitype to the fineness of Charlemagne's court. Little time is wasted exploring his possible motives, or the psychology of his treachery. He is just ‘Ganelon, who committed treason’, ‘Guenelun, ki traisun ad faite’.

The part of Macbeth which is painted in the earlier scenes, when Duncan is alive, has this bedrock sense of loyalty to tribe, brought to life in the poetry of grace and decorum which surrounds the king, and in the unsophisticated, drums-and-trumpets magnanimity of the wounded Sergeant's epic verse. So has the play's ending, when simple, uncomplicatedly loyal men like the Siwards fight with the aid of ‘the powers above’. To this part of the play the tragic hero is simply ‘devilish Macbeth’, and when his bleeding head is brought in
against a background of green boughs we witness a scene similar to that at the end of The Song of Roland, where the blood of Ganelon is splashed on the green grass, ‘sur l'erbe verte … espant’, as the infamous renegade, the ‘fel recreant’, is torn to pieces by Charlemagne's horses.

This part of Macbeth is primitive, assured, and unshadowed. Its tenor could hardly be more remote from those elements in the play which, giving their exploratory, problematic regard to the great solitary rather than the group, send us forward to the lonely sinners of Romantic mythology. Not favourably inclined towards the mighty damned of Romantic tragedy and having no truck with the likes of Mozart's glamorous and brilliant nuisance, it brings the straying modernist to heel by celebrating the ordinary daylight with flawless conviction. This is the rugged, epic part of the play, stronger here than anywhere else in Shakespearian drama, and much stronger than anywhere else in the tragedies. It takes unqualified pleasure in the restoration of things to ‘measure, time, and place’.

BACK TO MACBETH—ANCIENT AND MODERN

But the truly astonishing thing about Macbeth is that both parts of it exist and hang perfectly together, making many long centuries seem to turn on it as on a hinge. It embodies a vision of destruction on the Wagnerian scale and engages a sense of the fatality of deeds which need concede nothing to the great pessimists of the nineteenth century. It gives profound attention to the doomed, the destructive and the solitary, and with that attention goes an emotional regard which is fully aware of their status and greatness. It thus gives the world a hero such as Melville might have tracked to hell, Coleridge followed to the extremities of death in life, or Wagner pursued down the relentless logic of his and his world's undoing.

Yet at the same time it does not break faith with the Duncan simplicities, ending with the beautiful, unforced optimism of its daylight recovery. After all that blackness and blood, all that unstinted engagement with vain striving and doomed heroism, it finds at the end a nearly miraculous sense of liberation and renewal, created with an unemphatic elegance and lightness all its own.

Perhaps only Mozart's Don Giovanni has so capacious a double regard, both for the extraordinary solitary who flouts the world and for the more ordinary, flouted people who must live with him and endure his violating presence. Don Giovanni is in some ways like Macbeth's comic twin, the supreme comedy of the night's disruptive mischief to match Macbeth's tragedy of its horrors. The two works tell of a passage through the night, the one brilliantly comic for all that a tragic shadow stalks its story at every turn, the other a horrifying tragedy whose story none the less follows the festive-comic pattern of eventual release into the daylight; and the wonderful thing about them both is the apparent effortlessness with which they achieve this balance.

As far as Macbeth is concerned, this effortless balance has everything to do with its double allegiance. It belongs equally to an ancient, secure, sacred world and to a modern, problematic one. Its wide embrace is thus given to something very much like the sombre pessimism of the Romantics; and then it turns back to its old, sacred traditions, lifted out of the dark by the Christian-sacred imagery of redemption and, even more, by a pagan-sacred vision of the woods' eternal re-greening.

Criticism: Character Studies: John Turner (essay date 1992)


[In the following essay, Turner studies the figure of Duncan in Macbeth, focusing particular attention on this character's status as a signifier of feudal ideology and on performance interpretations made by directors Trevor Nunn and Roman Polanski in their productions of the drama.]
During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was increasingly a ‘reinforcement of patriarchy’ in England and Scotland as the new Renaissance states struggled to secure legitimacy for themselves (Stone 1979: 109). By ‘patriarchy’ I mean a political system concentrating power in the hands of men, especially men within their families—power secured in the Renaissance by primogeniture and authorized by a network of mutually sustaining analogies between the powers of father, God and king. While the aristocracy of the middle ages had defined their power in terms of ‘dominance over kin and clientage’ (Stone 1979: 111), power under the new monarchies was increasingly celebrated as the prerogative of the father (the \textit{paterfamilias}) within his own household and of the king (the \textit{pater patriae}) within his own kingdom. This redefinition formed part of an ideological campaign designed to reduce aristocratic power and to reconstitute the kingdom as a constellation of small households turning upon its centre of the crown. Under James, the campaign was intensified still further; for, with continental theories and practice in mind, James idealized himself as the father of his people, demanding their absolute obedience and demonizing their dissent more than any of his predecessors had done. Increasingly under James, the great principles of patriarchy established the whole religious and political duty of mankind: to honour and obey one's father, one's king and one's God.

Two consequences of this increasing centralization and totalization of power concern me here. First, there was the severity of the punishment sanctioned against dissidence, especially in Scotland, where the witch-hunts illustrate the ferocity of patriarchy in defending its privileges and beliefs. Second, there was the evolution of a diffuse consciousness of times past when things were different. This consciousness took many literary forms: that of aristocratic romance, with its dreams of a larger, more spacious world; of satire, with its denunciation of a machiavellian present where reciprocity had been lost amid ‘the decay of the old social bonds’ (Thomas 1973: 672); and of history, with its gradually emergent recognition that there really had been a different world, a feudal world sustained by feudal law, in which the concept of reciprocity had been central. This feudal law, which codified the parcelling out of land by the monarch to his warlords in exchange for their promise of military aid, had been identified by Thomas Craig in his \textit{Jus Feudale}, a book dedicated to James in 1603, as particularly the law of Scotland.

Let us turn now to Duncan in \textit{Macbeth}. How important a character to the play is he, do you think? Often weakly cast in the theatre, and ignored in criticism, he may seem no more than a two-dimensional figure, a king cut out of cardboard only in order to be cut down: Macbeth's victim and no more. In Holinshed's \textit{Chronicles} Duncane was ‘soft and gentle of nature’, ‘negligent … in punishing offendors’, with ‘too much of clemencie’ in him—a ruler whom the rebellious Makdowald could plausibly mock as ‘a faint-hearted milkesop, more meet to gouerne a sort of idle moonks in some cloister, than to haue the rule of such valiant and hardie men of warre as the Scots were’ (1587/1965: 265). You may feel that Shakespeare's Duncan too is excessively mild. Yet no one in the play makes this criticism: everyone, even the man who kills him, reveres him as a good man and a good king.

But what kind of goodness is it that Duncan embodies? Is he a model of the new Renaissance absolutism that James admired, or a figure from an imagined past, born out of Shakespeare's romantic idealization of vanished possibility, his satire upon a shrunken present, his historical curiosity about a kingship that today we should call early feudal? I want in this [essay] to discuss Duncan's kingship in the light of the social and political structures of the country that he rules, for I believe that his ideology and practice offer a model of feudal reciprocity with power to challenge the absolutist aspirations of James, whose writings show no more than the vestigial traces of such reciprocity.

\section{I}

\emph{Let us begin with I.ii. What is the nature of the crisis facing the Scotland over which Duncan rules?}

\subsection*{DISCUSSION}
As the play opens, Scotland is being attacked by the combined forces of an enemy without and an enemy within: a Norwegian invasion is being assisted by the rebellious uprising of two of its own most powerful subjects, Macdonwald and Cawdor. Duncan is thus involved at once in the two great duties of kingship that James identified in *Basilikon Doron*: ‘the sword is given you by God not onely to reuenge vpon your owne subiects, the wrongs committed amongst themselues; but further, to reuenge and free them of forraine injuries done vnto them’ (1599/1965: 28).

Yet are not these two kinds of injury differently depicted in the text? Is not the external aggression of Norway described quite matter-of-factly beside the internal rebellion of Macdonwald and Cawdor? Foreign invasion is only to be expected in the competitive world of international politics, where kingly honour is won by conquest: it is only natural, we might say. But the rebellion of Macdonwald and Cawdor is described as something most unnatural—or, more accurately, as something natural in a quite different sense of the word. Cawdor is a ‘most disloyal traitor’ (I.ii.53) who deceived ‘our bosom interest’ (I.ii.66), while Macdonwald in pursuit of his ‘damned quarrel’ (I.i.14) is considered ‘worthy to be a rebel, for to that / The multiplying villainies of nature / Do swarm upon him’ (I.ii.10-12). A snake in the bosom, a man infested as though with lice: Cawdor and Macdonwald are demonized, diseased, and the imagery that gathers around them—‘shipwracking storms and direful thunders’ (I.ii.26)—recalls the Weird Sisters, who similarly nurture the multiplying villainies of nature.

I.ii thus raises at once the central theme of the play—the theme of betrayal: betrayal by the enemy within, in those nearest relationships where men and women have placed their dearest trust. Such betrayal cuts so deep because, in part, it shows the insufficiency of the taboos controlling our social behaviour; it shows the naturalness of what we like to call the unnatural.

What is Duncan doing about the war and civil war raging in Scotland? In Polanski we see a grizzled king in late middle age riding with a troop of followers across the battlefield, stopping to receive the latest despatches from the front; in Nunn we see him old and infirm, praying and receiving the news upon his knees. Which is truer to your own vision of Duncan in this scene?

DISCUSSION

It is uncertain from the text whether Duncan has been fighting or not. What is certain, however, is that his survival depends upon the success of his two most powerful warlords, Macbeth and Banquo. He is at the mercy of both their prowess and their loyalty, and this dependence emphasizes equally the instability of his kingdom and the vulnerability of his own position within it. No matter whether he fights, prays or passively waits upon events, the scene declares his vulnerability; and the older and more venerable he appears in performance, the more vulnerable he becomes. The most powerful man in the country is also the weakest—a paradox that Shakespeare has emphasized by making his Duncan much older than the Duncane of the sources.

To put the same point in a more theoretical way, one of the chief structural weaknesses of feudalism is the position of the monarch. Although needed by his aristocracy as a centre of political authority, his authority—when challenged—is wholly reliant upon aristocratic military power for its effectiveness. In Perry Anderson’s words, there was ‘an inbuilt contradiction within feudalism, between its own rigorous tendency to a decomposition of sovereignty and the absolute exigencies of a final centre of authority in which a practical recomposition could occur’ (1974: 152); and this contradiction is crucial to *Macbeth*. Duncan, with no national army to call on, is wholly reliant upon his warlords; and yet the warlords upon whom he relies are his greatest rivals for the crown. The taboo on usurpation suggests the temptation it holds for an aristocrat jealous for the honour of his family—a temptation fuelled by the king’s dependency. As Harry Berger Jr says, ‘the more his subjects do for him, the more he must do for them; the more he does for them, feeding their ambition and their power, the less secure can he be of his mastery’ (1980: 24-5).
Production choices about Duncan's age and military involvement will therefore be governed in part by the importance attached to this paradox of the vulnerable king. But other dangers attend Duncan too, apart from foreign invasion and internal insurrection. Read the Captain's speeches (I.ii.7-43). In what style are they written? Would you agree with Coleridge (1836/1987: 305) when he described them as epic in manner? What further dangers to Duncan do they suggest?

**DISCUSSION**

Epic aims at a narrative style suitable to heroic deeds; and the Captain, in speaking of 'cannons overcharged with double cracks' and the desire to 'memorize another Golgotha', is striving for a language adequate to the apocalyptic nature of the action he has just witnessed. Notice, however, how his first two speeches are rhetorically patterned so as to keep the issue of the battle in doubt until the very last moment. He relishes his account of the fighting as much as the victory to which it leads, and, in recreating both the violence and the uncertainties of war, he alerts us to the dangers besetting a society whose peace depends upon the equivocal benefits of military power.

The violence of the Captain's speech is quite remarkable: a violence whose barbarousness gives us our first impressions of Macbeth. The strained, heroic manner of the Captain, together with his depersonalization of Macbeth as 'Valour's minion' and his iconic representation of him with brandished sword smoking in hand, all work to create a tragic hero who seems a terrible, almost inhuman, force—as capable of devastating friend and foe alike as he is of defending the realm. Macbeth, like Cawdor, has a 'lavish spirit' (Lii.58)—and this phrase, signifying excesses that range from bountifulness and prodigality on the one hand to insolence and licentiousness on the other, indicates an important ambivalence at the heart of the aristocratic code. For such lavishness, such extravagance, characterizes the aristocratic idea of virtue, exciting admiration even in excess. Perhaps Rosse has a secret undertow of admiration for Cawdor at Lii.58. Certainly he admires Macbeth, as does the Captain, for the extravagance, the sheer excess of his fighting, the way in which he doubly redoubles his blows. It does not take this anticipation of the Sisters, who in IV.i doubly redouble their blows against Scotland, to remind us that there is danger here. The danger is that the forces that should defend a country might also be the forces that destroy it. The military code of honour espoused by the feudal aristocracy and their king promoted values and energies as dangerous to the common weal as they were beneficial.

Thus the Duncan of I.ii alerts us to the dangers attending both his kingdom and his crown. His military dependence and his enviable status, together with the competitive culture of his warlords, threaten a recurrence of civil war as a natural probability, despite his best attempts to make it seem unnatural. Between internal unrest and external aggression, it seems unlikely that Scotland will enjoy much peace; and so indeed it proves.

*Duncan's response to the Captain's first speech offers the actor an interesting challenge. 'O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!' he exclaims (I.ii.24). How should this line be spoken? Is Duncan aware of the dangers of trying to build a peace upon the arts of war, do you think? or naively unaware? Is he a naïve and foolish king?*

**DISCUSSION**

Duncan's gratitude is his response to the Captain's extraordinary description of Macbeth's refusal to shake hands or otherwise bid farewell to Macdonwald until he had 'unseam'd' him from the belly to the throat. Macdonwald might be no more than a suit of old clothes that the tailor has just ripped up. This juxtaposition of the civil and the savage is, as Brian Morris has noticed (1982: 52), deeply characteristic of *Macbeth*. But is Duncan aware of it? Does he sense the disjunction between the arts of war and peace, the styles of epic and civilized exchange? Does he see that his line might ring with grotesque comedy after the Captain's words: that it 'jars oddly against the violence it approves' (Mack 1973: 150)? How intelligent a ruler is he?
After Cawdor's death, the Duncan of Polanski's film enjoys a perpetual good humour, as though he were a friendly bank manager. Resolute in the business of kingship, relaxed after his triumph, he has no other distinguishing characteristics. And it is possible to act him in this way. But it is not the only way. Yes, we may underwrite his determination and goodness, as Polanski does. We may even ironize his naivety by emphasizing his ignorance of the disjunction between the discourses of killing and courtesy: perhaps Polanski aims at such an irony by contrasting Duncan with the unsmiling and watchful Malcolm. But is there not another way of playing him too, in which he glimpses into the horrors of the society he rules before getting on with the job? Trevor Nunn's Duncan, old and infirm as he is, sees the horror, but seeks to bear it all upon his own back: ‘Mea culpa,’ he murmurs, like a saint or a scapegoat, a primitive king whose ritual sacrifice will purge the kingdom of its guilt. Almost too helpless to govern, his gratitude to Macbeth is spoken in the cracked voice of extreme old age. Yet it need not be so. May not his praise of Macbeth's valour and worthiness be offered in full knowledge of the threat he constitutes and in full determination to avert it? A pause before that difficult line above would do the trick and make it seem part of a policed way of dealing with threat.

Seen in this light, Duncan's attempt is to turn the soldier back into the gentleman. He is trying to reclaim the unceremonious energies of war for the ceremoniousness of peace, the equivocal values of the aristocratic code for the cause of civilization. Yet remember that it is a civilization in which he remains king. If all his behaviour in this scene, as he rewards 'Bellona's bridegroom' (I.ii.55) with the title of thane of Cawdor, may be seen as the expression of a virtuous gratitude, it may also be seen as a determined bid to stay on top in a highly competitive world. Trevor Nunn's Duncan lacks the competitive edge needed to survive in such a society. The king cannot determine who shall win or lose the battle—for that he is dependent upon his warlords—but, should he win, he can determine who shall win or lose honours. By such dispensation of honours the feudal monarch made good his lack of military power. Yet the irony of Duncan's unconscious echo of the Sisters in his closing line about things lost and won (I.ii.69) emphasizes the implausibility of his whole enterprise. The arts of peace cannot be served by the arts of war. Nor can they be served without them—and here is a contradiction crucial to the play.

Duncan, however, has more than the distribution of state honours to reinforce his authority: he has a fully articulated philosophy of kingship too. Let us turn now to I.iv to elucidate this philosophy, the official belief system of the Scotland which Shakespeare has imagined for his play.

II

Read I.iv. After his relative passivity in I.ii, Duncan now resumes his active kingly responsibilities. Polanski shows a king determined to be firm, Nunn a king too old to be so. Ask yourself what pieces of business Duncan has in hand, then how effectively he tackles them. What beliefs about the nature of kingship do his words and actions suggest?

DISCUSSION

There are three pieces of business that Duncan undertakes in I.iv: he receives the news of Cawdor's execution, he welcomes and rewards his thanes, and he settles the succession upon his son. Past, present and future must be seamlessly united, as Duncan grapples with the testing process of re-establishing social order after the turmoil of war. It is a dangerous time in the history of any society when the armies return home and the immunities of military life are surrendered to civic duty, and it is this transition that Duncan now has to negotiate. Surrounded by his court, he sets about restoring to currency the political ideology upon which his kingdom rests.

This ideology is feudal in a very pure form. We may approach it through the ‘compt’ rendered by Malcolm of Cawdor's death, which it is Duncan's first piece of business to hear (I.iv.1-14):
... very frankly he confess'd his treasons,
Implor'd your Highness' pardon, and set forth
A deep repentance. Nothing in his life
Became him like the leaving it: he died
As one that had been studied in his death,
To throw away the dearest thing he ow'd,
As 'twere a careless trifle.

(I.iv.5-11)

Here is aristocratic lavishness expended in an honourable cause. The traitor had set up his own will and his own view of the world against those of his sovereign, but now in his death he honours the God and king whom he had formerly disobeyed. A personal crime against the body of the king has been avenged upon the body of its perpetrator; frank confession has replaced covert ambition; and the seamless political harmony which Duncan cultivates, extending from God through king to subject, appears to have been secured as Cawdor finally renounces his rebellious desires—a harmony, however, soon to be shattered as, with an irony disclosing the inadequacies of Duncan's ideology, the same 'black and deep desires' resurface in Macbeth at Liv.51.

Both the duties of the feudal bond and the contradictions which it conceals are beautifully encapsulated for us by the concept of 'owing' that Malcolm invokes; for, in the late feudal society of Shakespeare's Britain, the verb 'to owe' might mean either 'to owe' or 'to own'. According to feudal ideology, all property and office was held as trust: the nobility held their lands of the king for his service, and the king held his throne—either of God or of his people—for their better protection. Thus, as Cawdor implicitly confesses at the last, the subject had no right to his own will, his own view of the world. He did not even own his own life, he owed it; and now the king is calling his debts in. Yet, of course, the other sense of 'to owe' as 'to own' was always ready to assert itself, generally in the interest of the individual family against the state. Kin might always be preferred to king, and it is to guard against this possibility that Duncan is busy. Although disappointed in the 'absolute trust' which he had placed in Cawdor (I.iv.14), he will nevertheless continue to strengthen the bond between himself and his subjects by fostering trust. For trust—a moral virtue grounded in the realities of property relations under feudalism—offers him one way of turning his military and political weaknesses into strength.

The question to be faced in production, of course, is that of Duncan's good sense in affirming trust in despite of treason. In Nunn he is too infirm to do otherwise: grieved by Cawdor but grateful towards Macbeth, the moral contradictions of his experience overwhelm his failing powers. In Polanski it is rather the political contradictions of his society that defeat him. Here the figure of Cawdor frames the scene, beginning with a confession whose tones are wholly ambiguous and ending with the swinging body of his corpse as Macbeth avows his own treacherous desires. In neither film is trust sufficient; but shall we blame the weakness of the king or the tragic contradictions of his situation?

*Turn now to Duncan's second piece of business, the welcoming and rewarding of his thanes (I.iv.14-35). Here he discloses the full ambition of his ideology, as he tries to weave man, nature and God into harmonious unity. Let us take his relationship with each of these in turn. First, his attitude towards his fellow-countrymen. Read Duncan's opening address to Macbeth (Liv.14-21) and ask yourself what it shows of Duncan's feudal ideology.*

**DISCUSSION**

Duncan expresses his gratitude to Macbeth and Banquo by declaring his *indebtedness* to them; and it is in this way that he reaffirms his commitment to the politics of trust:
… Thou art so far before,
That swiftest wing of recompense is slow
To overtake thee: would thou hadst less deserv'd,
That the proportion both of thanks and payment
Might have been mine! only I have left to say,
More is thy due than more than all can pay.

(I.iv.14-21)

The relationship defined in these striking lines is not, as might first appear, primarily a financial one: Macbeth is no mercenary. His richest reward will lie in Duncan's increased sense of debt: payment will find its worth in thanks, not thanks in payment. Duncan declares his gratitude in open court, for he wants his relationship with his cousin to epitomize the principle of reciprocity upon which he would rule the whole country—a reciprocity in which debt can never be repaid but only deepened under the gentle discipline of gratitude. Therefore he entrusts himself to his most powerful subject at the moment of his greatest power; and therefore, fatefully, he determines to visit him at Inverness, indebting himself still further in his desire to ‘bind us further to you’ (I.iv.43).

Yet there is something else about these lines too, to which Harry Berger Jr (1980: 20) has drawn attention, and that is the competitiveness which they disclose between Duncan and Macbeth. The king humbles himself only in order that the subject should do the same: he is engaged upon a courtly game, a coercive ritual with whose requirements Macbeth is perfectly familiar, as the studied courtesy of his reply makes plain. They vie in self-effacement with one another; like two people who arrive at a door together and give way to one other, they defuse the fear of aggression by an elaborately patterned ceremony. ‘After you’: ‘No, after you.’ Macbeth has gone so far before, says Duncan, that he will never be able to catch him up. He has preceded him; and we shall appreciate the dangers of Duncan's strategy if we remember the importance of precedence to a hierarchical society. For Duncan is in effect, unconsciously, tempting Macbeth, his ‘peerless kinsman’ (I.iv.58), with the crown. His policy of trust—and I do not mean by this that he is insincere—may encourage the very treachery that he is trying to prevent. The social ritual in which he is engaged carries a high risk: the person who adopts a submissive posture may always get beaten up. Yet Duncan goes through with it: he dies true to his dangerous faith that Scotland might be ruled harmoniously as an extended family whose manners of deferential gratitude will defuse the malice of aggression.

Such a reading implies that Duncan is fully self-conscious about the strategies that he adopts, watchful (as perhaps all feudal monarchs were) of the power struggles threatening the courtly conversational rituals that evolved to contain them. Is Duncan watchful in this way, do you think, careful of his power? Or is he naïvely trustful? Or is the real point elsewhere, quite apart from Duncan's virtues or vices, in the perception that it lies tragically beyond the art of man, especially in a courtly world but maybe more generally too, ‘to find the mind's construction in the face’ (I.iv.12)?

Second, what do these same lines (I.iv.14-34) show of Duncan's attitude to nature? What do you learn from his metaphor describing the art of kingship in terms of farming (I.iv.28-9), and also from his metaphor at the start of I.vi, breathing life into the breeze before Macbeth’s castle?

DISCUSSION

Nature, like the commonwealth, is also the field of human labour for Duncan, a site upon which the reciprocities of service and gratitude spin their soft webs of mutual indebtedness. When he says to Banquo that he has begun ‘to plant thee, and will labour / To make thee full of growing’ (I.iv.28-9), he is showing his faith in the complementarity of art and nature and the labour that binds them reciprocally together. King, thane and commoner alike, he implies, share the same ‘natural’ responsibility to tend the things in their trust in order to reap their promised reward.
But it is I.vi.1-3 that contain the loveliest illustration of Duncan's attitude to nature as, in ignorance of what lies within, he praises the beauty of Macbeth's castle:

This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses.

Can you recognize the metaphor by which Duncan identifies the breeze here? Does he not see it as a servant, whose courteous alacrity he rewards by his own grateful notice? The metaphor has a double effect: it naturalizes the social relationship, and this in turn familiarizes nature, so that we sense no discontinuity between the natural and the social worlds. Characteristically, Duncan speaks of the recommendations of the breeze, as earlier he spoke of the commendations of Macbeth (I.iv.55); and behind both words we hear the technical feudal term of commendatio, the act whereby a freeman offers service to a lord in exchange for protection. For it is a language of feudal reciprocity that Duncan uses, picked up by Banquo in his own way when he goes on to speak of the temple-haunting martlet as the guest of summer, wooed by the breeze to make its home amid lov'd mansionry (I.vi.3-10). The king sees patterns of service that confirm him in his status; the guest sees patterns of invitation that confirm him in his. The ‘multiplying villainies of nature’ seem quite forgotten here, although of course they remain the hidden text behind this public reading of nature as the register of human reciprocity.

Lastly, what can you find in I.iv and in I.vi to illustrate Duncan's attitude to God?

DISCUSSION

At the heart of Duncan's vision of harmony lies his faith in God. When he speaks to Macbeth of the sin of his ingratitude, he implies that the pattern of debt and gratitude which he is trying to replicate finds its ultimate validation in the nature of man's relationship to God. Many critics of Macbeth believe, with Brian Morris, that ‘it is a moral, though not a religious, play’ (1982: 41). But can so sharp a distinction be made?

The feudal society that Shakespeare has imagined for Macbeth, as for King Lear, is a world united in a shared understanding of social bonds—a word difficult for modern audiences to grasp, since it mediates between areas of experience that today we commonly keep apart: ideas of duty and affection, of natural and social law, of spontaneous love and traditional attachment. The Latin word pietas perhaps comes closest to the English bond of the Renaissance, signifying as it does that desirable conduct towards God and man in which duty and affection meet, each in confirmation of the other. When Duncan speaks of the sin of ingratitude, he is declaring his faith in a world whose ordinary everyday pieties are transfused with religious meaning. It is a sacramental vision, denying the distinction between morality and religion, committed to reading the worlds of nature and ‘human nature’ as Nature, the sacred text of God.

Turn again to I.vi, and puzzle out Duncan's words of welcome to Lady Macbeth, as she advances with perhaps an overeffusive smile of welcome on her lips:

The love that follows us sometime is our trouble,
Which still we thank as love. Herein I teach you,
How you shall bid God 'ild us for your pains,
And thank us for your trouble.

(I.vi.11-14)

In the difficult and elaborate courtesy of these lines, Duncan displays the laborious responsibility of kingship to find in every moment of life an example to instruct his subjects in the endless replication of debt and gratitude that alone has power to bond together in one society the Creator and the whole of his created world.
I have found some words of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss helpful in imagining the kind of society that Shakespeare has invented for Duncan's Scotland—a society where man, nature and God are built into a structure so perfect, and so frail, that the gentlest push might bring it down.

In these ‘early’ societies, social phenomena are not discrete; each phenomenon contains all the threads of which the social fabric is composed. In these total social phenomena, as we propose to call them, all kinds of institutions find simultaneous expression: religious, legal, moral and economic.

(Mauss 1966: 1)

In such a society, heavily tabooed and ritualized, each orderly action symbolizes and reproduces the order of the whole; and each disorderly action bodes its total destruction. As Mauss observes, ‘in these primitive and archaic societies there is no middle path. There is either complete trust or mistrust’ (1966: 79).

Let us now turn to Duncan's third piece of business in Liv, the establishment of the succession on his son (I.iv.35-42). In Holinshed, the Scottish system of royal succession is a tanistic one, ‘whereby the succession to an estate or dignity was conferred by election upon the “eldest and worthiest” among the surviving kinsmen of the deceased lord’ (OED 1989). Such a system gave Macbeth a legitimate hope for the throne and a legitimate grievance against Duncan for depriving him of it. But in Shakespeare this is not an issue: Duncan has power to nominate Malcolm his successor as the thanes have to nominate Macbeth after Malcolm absconds. Why then does he choose this moment to settle the succession upon his son? What effect does his decision have?

DISCUSSION

It is Duncan's timing in nominating his own son for the succession at this particular moment that raises most acutely the question of his wisdom or his folly as a ruler. Does he realize that he is facing powerful subjects at their most powerful, flushed with military success that might enkindle them unto the crown? And if he does know, is his announcement the ‘final misjudgment’ that Michael Hawkins thinks it (1982: 175), or the most prudent course of action to control those subjects and avert the danger of civil war? Is it perhaps yet another ritual to be defined by the risk that it runs?

These questions, although provisionally answered in every production of the play, are finally unanswerable. On the one hand, Duncan has been acted as childishly credulous, the victim of his own ‘almost incredible want of caution’ and ‘unguarded confidence’ (see Rosenberg 1978: 147). On the other hand, he has been acted as a canny ruler who stage-manages the distribution of honours in I.iv in order to practise the hoary art of dividing and ruling: by praising first Macbeth, then Banquo, then his own son above them both, he seeks both to exploit and to contain the competitiveness of court culture which is so dangerous to him (see Rosenberg 1978: 152-3). We may see something of these two extremes if we compare the Nunn and Polanski productions; for while Nunn's Duncan is almost childishly credulous, with a credulity which seems an aspect of his sanctity, as though he were a holy fool, in Polanski we see a determined ruler struggling to control a rivalrous court, and killed because his watchfulness does not extend to his own kinsman. Such interpretations clearly express an understanding of the play as a whole: the morality play of Nunn, with its weak but virtuous Duncan, highlights the villainy of Macbeth; while Polanski's more political film, with its stronger king, highlights instead the structural contradictions within the play's society.

In case Duncan's characterization seems to you unsatisfactorily vague, let me suggest finally that our ignorance serves a dramatic purpose: to remind us that, despite his commitment to the politics of trust and openness, Duncan's conduct in fact is ambiguous and reserved. Where there is power, there is mistrust: and the greatest mistrust of all surrounds the succession. As his verse ceremoniously exerts the discipline of place
on those around him, restoring sons, kinsmen and thanes to their rightful order of precedence, it also confers a
new pre-eminence upon his son. Is Duncan acting here for the good of the state or for the good of his own
family? Is he serving the harmony of the whole or the interest of the part? These questions cut to the heart of
Duncan's whole ideological enterprise, for they enable us to glimpse that ideology as a function of his power.
They remind us that the religious harmony privileged by Duncan is one which privileges himself and his
family too, and that this in turn breeds malice among his subjects. The structure of the scene makes the point
for us: as Duncan reproduces the political order of the former world, he also reproduces in Macbeth those
same ‘black and deep desires’ (I.iv.51) which have already led to civil war.

III

Turn again to I.vi. Duncan's last appearance in the play shows him upon the threshold of Macbeth's castle,
greeted by Lady Macbeth. What meaning does this image hold for you?

DISCUSSION

When Duncan stands in courteous praise before the looming battlements of Macbeth's castle, it is a moment of
dramatic irony typical of the whole of the play's first act: a dramatic irony betraying a deeper irony still, which
we may trace to the moral nature of man or to the political structure of Scotland, or indeed to both together,
but whose immediate material base is in the prestige and property relationships of feudalism—the irony that
brings forth malice out of trust.

In *Macbeth* malice is given precedence over trust; it goes before, continuously creating dramatic ironies which
disclose the implausibility of Duncan's hopes for peace. We met the Sisters in I.i before Duncan in I.ii, and
here we meet the hostess in I.v before the guest in I.vi. Right from the start we see the paradox of the code by
which Duncan lives: namely, that the mutual trust which he promotes is a powerful ideology when successful,
but awesomely frail when it fails. There is no middle path, and its frailty seems all the greater when we
remember the importance attached in feudal ceremony to who goes where to pay respect. For this is a more
primitive, more dangerous, feudalism than that of Tudor and Jacobean England, where monarchs regularly
progressed from stately home to stately home, both to honour and to exhaust the wealth of their wealthiest
subjects. Here there is danger when the monarch comes to the subject, especially as a guest, putting himself in
his host's protection. Duncan's praise of Macbeth's castle is the last time in the play that anyone will enjoy a
relaxed relationship with the otherness of the external world, and Banquo's reply is the last time that a subject
will be able to 'do faithful homage, and receive free honours' (III.vi.36) in exchange with his sovereign. After
this, as Duncan makes his fatal entrance under the battlements, the light thickens and the atmosphere becomes
claustrophobic, strained, hallucinatory.

Yet Duncan is true to his faith to the end. Perhaps something in him balks at the approach of Lady Macbeth;
but heroically, or naïvely, he goes through with it. He turns his fatigue into a pattern of love, as we have seen,
and then once more inverts traditional precedence in ritual self-submission. He had wanted to become her
husband's 'purveyor', he says (I.vi.22), his servant, riding before him in order to prepare for his arrival. It is a
benign inversion. What the Sisters do in malice, Duncan does to foster trust—or, in another language, to
reproduce a symmetrical self-submission in his subjects. Notice the diamond which he gives to Lady Macbeth
as he goes to bed (II.i.15): he dies as he lived, acting out his faith in the value of mutual indebtedness.

But Lady Macbeth is more than a match for him. In this dangerous society, where gestures of trust are
ritualized in order to minimize misunderstanding and reduce risk, Lady Macbeth thrives upon the fact that the
outward show of ritual may be simulated.

... All our service,
In every point twice done, and then done double,
Were poor and single business, to contend
Against those honours deep and broad, wherewith
Your Majesty loads our house:

(I.vi.14-18)

These lines show her awareness of the competition in service which maintains the status quo in feudal society, and her next lines show her alacrity to account her possessions as debts to the king (I.vi.25-8). But, behind the dance of her courtesy, a quite different competitive spirit is astir, leading to a quite different kind of reckoning. If Duncan is prudently seeking trust from a position of power, she is treacherously seeking power from a position of trust. Nunn shows her horrified by her own treachery and reluctant to touch Duncan as she welcomes him; but in Polanski she revels in it, dancing with Duncan and smirking with appalling frankness upon him. It is a horror that we shall understand more fully in retrospect when the redoubled toil and trouble of which she speaks (I.vi.15) declares its secret affinity with the work of the Sisters. For its heart is malice, the excited and exciting betrayal of trust; and it is the vulnerability of trust that we see in that ironic picture of Duncan before the castle of Macbeth.

IV

Trust and malice, Duncan and the Sisters: two sides of the same coin, fellow-contraries that perpetually reproduce one another within an ‘early’ society where the enviable status of king rests dangerously upon the military prowess of his warlords. The ideology of reciprocity by which Duncan rules is in fact a necessity of his political dependency, and it functions only by demonizing dissent. Shakespeare does not make the connection between the recent development of a centralized monarchy and the witch-hunts that we might make today. Instead, imagining a society more primitive than his own, he shows how Duncan's faith in reciprocity works to control the unstable competitive culture of which he is the head, how his gentleness works to occlude its violent hierarchy. It is the hidden violence of this hierarchy that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth will now disclose as they act out their desires between the poles of trust and malice upon which their kingdom turns.

References


Though Lady Macbeth's is not a huge part—she speaks only a third of the lines that Cleopatra does, and under half of Portia's in The Merchant of Venice—two towering (but very different) theatrical reputations were built largely on performances as Lady Macbeth: Sarah Siddons's in the eighteenth century and Ellen Terry's in the nineteenth. Siddons was the lofty terrorizer of her husband, and Terry the pre-Raphaelite spectre who dooms him with her beauty. No actor of modern times—since, that is, the inception of the “curse” on the play—has won such general recognition for excelling in this part, though presumably even Siddons and Terry may have fallen short of the first Lady Macbeth, John Rice.

Shakespeare's greatest parts for women naturally cluster at periods when the playwright had an outstanding boy actor, and the lead boy in 1606-07 had three choice parts in a row—Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra, as well as Barnes's Lucretia in The Devil's Charter. (The actor may, in fact, have had a fourth great role if the view that a boy played the Fool in Lear is right.)

Who was that boy? All the evidence points to John Rice. He was singled out, along with the lead adult actor Richard Burbage, to appear before the King in an ambitious program financed by the Merchant Taylors of London in the summer of 1607. Rice was elaborately costumed for the occasion. Though his speech—specially composed by Ben Jonson—only ran to twelve lines, brilliant delivery was important to the spectacle. Rice's master, John Heminges, was paid forty shillings “for his direction of his boy that made the speech to His Majesty,” while the boy got five shillings.

Burbage and Rice obviously made a winning pair, since they appeared together in at least one other special performance, three years later—this one to welcome Prince Henry's arrival in London. Anthony Munday wrote the lines performed by Burbage as Amphion, and Rice as Corinea. Rice, who went on to a distinguished acting career as an adult before becoming a clergyman, obviously had grace, good looks, and sweet diction in 1607, when Shakespeare wrote for him the demanding part of Cleopatra, performed at court in the Christmas season of 1606-07.
That was an amazing season. It is known that the King's Men acted *Lear* on the day after Christmas and *The Devil's Charter* on Candlemas (February 2). There is growing belief that *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra* were also acted in the season—a break-out time after the long closing of the public theatres by the plague. A remarkable feature of all of these plays is their fascination with witchcraft. *Antony* constantly refers to Cleopatra as having witch-like powers. Lucreia in *The Devil's Charter* is not only the daughter of the conjuring male witch, Pope Alexander; she independently calls on hell's assistance for murdering her husband (lines 601-5):

You grisly daughter of grim Erebus,
Which spit out venom from your vip'rous hairs,
Infuse a threefold vigor in these arms,
Immarble more my strong indurate heart,
To consummate the plot of my revenge.

Compare Rice's other great role, as Cleopatra (5.2.238-40):

Of woman I have nothing in me. Now, from head to foot
I am marble-constant.

And compare those lines with Lady Macbeth's (1.5.42-43):

And fill me, from the crown to th' toe, topful
Of direst cruelty.

All these heroines ask to be made inhumanly “indurate” for their evil tasks.

Make thick my blood,
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose.(11)

This clustering of Rice's roles with a witch-like aspect (Lucretia Borgia, Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth) would seem to support those who consider Lady Macbeth the “fourth witch” of the play. Directors have emphasized her evil nature by associating her with the witches visually, or even by having her double the role of Hecate. It is true that she invokes Night and “murth'ring ministers” (demons)—just as her husband invokes Night and Hecate. Her evil ministers are clearly the fallen counterparts of angelic “ministers of grace” called on by Hamlet (1.4.39). In fact, Lady Macbeth's grand invocation at 1.5.40-54 is full of “witch talk.” She orders the evil spirits to “unsex me here”—and witches were famously unsexed, a fact emphasized in *Macbeth's* three witches, played by men. Banquo remarks on their beards at 1.3.45-47, as Hamlet does on the boy actor who had grown up to adult (bearded) parts at *Hamlet* 2.2.423. The witches' sexual traffic with devils was considered one consequence of their loss of sexual attractiveness for men. Lady Macbeth plays with the idea of that sexual traffic with devils when she calls the demons: “Come to my woman's breasts / And take my milk for gall.” Witches nursed their familiars from their “marks,” considered as teats for diabolic nourishment. Since the marks were often near witches' “privy parts,” the nursing could be a kind of foreplay preceding intercourse. La Pucelle calls on her familiars with a reminder how “I was wont to feed you with my blood” (*I Henry VI* 5.3.14). Joan's familiars, when they abandon her, refuse the offered teats, unlike other familiars, who feed onstage. In *The Witches of Edmonton*, the dog-familiar is seen sucking a mark on Mother Sawyer's arm (2.1.147), and another character describes the way he will “creep under an old witch's coats and suck like a great puppy” (5.1.173-74). Mother Sawyer says her mark has dried up, and asks the dog (4.1.157-60) to

Stand on thy hind legs—up, kiss me, my Tommy,
And rub some wrinkles on my brow
By making my old ribs shrug for joy
Of thy fine tricks. What hast thou done? Let’s tickle!

Hecate, who is a witch not a goddess in Middleton’s *The Witch*, calls to her familiar, the actor in a cat costume (3.3.49-50):

Here’s one come down to fetch his dues—
A kiss, a coll [hug], a sip of blood.

She has had sex with this familiar (1.2.96-97). In *The Late Lancashire Witches*, a witch is asked, “Hath thy puggy [little Puck] yet suck’d upon thy pretty duggy?” (line 2017).

The image of witches giving suck to animals was deep in the lore of Shakespeare’s time. Some resist having Lady Macbeth use this image; but we should remember that John Rice’s other part at the time, Cleopatra, involved a witch-like comparison of the serpent’s bite to an animal familiar’s sucking (*Antony* 5.2.309-10):

Dost thou not see my baby at my breast
That sucks the nurse asleep?

Even before her cry to the evil spirits, Lady Macbeth was associated with an animal familiar. Hearing a caw from offstage, she says: “The raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements” (1.5.38-40). His entry is fatal, as Hecate works “Unto a dismal and a fatal end” (3.5.21). The raven was a regular “familiar,” and its loud cry from offstage had special theatrical effect. Indeed, one of the more spectacular sound effects of the Elizabethan stage was the massive cawing of ravens that fulfilled a prophecy and defeated an army in *Edward III*, a play to which Shakespeare may have contributed.

It is likely that we have already heard the raven that crows over Lady Macbeth’s castle. In the opening scene, when familiars summon their witches away, two spirits are named—Graymalkin, a cat, and Paddock, a toad. The third witch answers her spirit’s call, “Anon.” The raven’s cry was too (yes) familiar to make identification necessary. At 4.1.3, the third witch’s animal is addressed as Harpier, an apparent nickname based on Harpy. The raven was a harpy, a food-snatcher. When carrion birds settled on corpses, popular fear and loathing depicted them as witches’ familiars gathering body parts. The witch literature fostered that belief. In Ben Jonson’s *The Sad Shepherd*, a raven waits as huntsmen corner a deer, and its witch is later seen in a chimney corner with a morsel the bird delivered to her. In *The Masque of Queens*, Jonson translated a passage from Lucan, in which a witch waits for a raven to snatch flesh off a corpse and then takes it from the raven. The raven is a particularly unclean bird, whose very presence acts as a curse on a house, as Othello notes (4.1.20-22):

As doth the raven o’er the’ infectious house
Boding to all.

Thersites, when he dreams of cursing, does so as a raven in his own mind: “I would croak like a raven, I would bode, I would bode” (*Troilus* 5.2.191). Caliban uses the raven when he curses (*Tempest* 1.2.321-33):

As wicked dew as e’er my [witch] mother brush’d,
With raven’s feather, from unwholesome fen
Drop on you both!

Thus, for Lady Macbeth to welcome the raven’s portent puts her in accord with witches’ thoughts, with the Hecate of Middleton’s *The Witch* (5.2.40-42):

Raven or screech-owl never fly by the door
Lady Macbeth’s castle is an “infectious house” with fatal gates to welcome Duncan.

In all these ways, Lady Macbeth certainly tries to become an intimate of evil, a communer with murdering ministers, fatal ravens, spirits who will give her suck. Does that make her a witch? Not in any technically legal or theological sense that King James (for instance) would have recognized. She does not enter into supernatural dealings with devils or their agents. There is no reciprocal activity of the sort Macbeth engages in at the necromancy. She is a witch of velleity and gestures, while he is one in fact. She forms no pact with the devil. Hecate does not appear to comfort her.

All these are important indicators of the way the part should be played. Lady Macbeth’s relation to her husband resembles that of Barnes’s Lucretia Borgia to her incestuous father. We see Pope Alexander strike his bargain with the devil, and pay for it; but Lucretia’s invocation of evil spirits is mainly a way of steeling herself to kill her husband. In that sense, it works. Like Lady Macbeth she is a murderess. Macbeth will take calculated steps deeper and deeper into collaboration with hellish forces, but Lady Macbeth falters early—as Macbeth realizes. After the murder of Duncan, he no longer relies on her help. He is looking to more powerful auxiliaries. “Be inn’cent of the knowledge, dearest chuck …” (3.2.45) was said with a kind of bemused tone of farewell by Olivier to Vivien Leigh. She is not hardened for the voyage he is taking by that time.24

Olivier seemed to some critics to underplay his early scenes because he was carefully counting the cost of his crime. He weighs the pros and cons of Duncan’s murder. He observes his own reactions, testing his pulse as he moves forward. His moves are less impulsive—and less shallow—than his wife’s immediate enthusiasm for the crime. When she wavers, it is from collapse, not calculation. She cannot kill the king because he looks like her father. She nerves herself with drink, claiming that it steadies her: “That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold” (2.2.1). But the drink is wearing off after the murder. She faints in the discovery scene—a genuine faint, not some shrewd attempt to distract people from Macbeth’s embarrassment. Some have said it is impossible for an actress to make it clear why she is fainting. But of Vivien Leigh’s faint it was written: “Genuine? Feigned? No need to ask the question. Her collapse was as inevitable a result of the dramatic process as is the spark when two charged wires are brought together.”25

The trouble with the majestic Sarah Siddons approach to Lady Macbeth is that it plunges the character too abruptly into collapse after her time of splendid power. The long absence of Lady Macbeth from the play makes the contrast less bridgeable. The Byam Shaw production of 1955 made the later Lady Macbeth shine through the bravado of the earlier one. When Macbeth launched into his own baroque description of the way he executed the grooms, Olivier experienced a strange power in his ability to describe as well as to do the act—he was finding himself oddly at home in his crime, horrified but also fascinated. He is becoming a connoisseur of the sensations of evil. But Lady Macbeth is stunned by his glib description of the murder. As he speaks, she reacts hypnotically, moving toward him over an abyss. “The two seemed drawn together by the compulsion of their common guilt to the center of the stage.”26 She cannot complete the passage over the chasm opening between them. She faints just as she is about to reach him.

The two are similarly divided in the banquet scene—Macbeth living inside his murder of Banquo, his wife kept outside, trying (ineffectually) to mediate between him and the external world. They are never seen together again—in fact, she is seen only one more time. What explains her long absence from the play? One naturally thinks, in a theater so dependent on doubling (especially where boys are concerned), that John Rice must be busy in another role.27 We have already seen that some directors want the modern actress to double Hecate; but that was impossible for Shakespeare. “Poel’s Rule” states that a character who exits at the close of one scene does not enter at the opening of the next.28 It is even less feasible, in the fluid conditions of Jacobean performance, for an actor to leave as one character and come right back on as another. Besides,
Hecate would need some form of gorgeous costume to suggest her supernatural status—more than could be thrown on for instant reappearance.

But there is another role Rice could have doubled—Macduff's wife. The power of this doubling was suggested in Trevor Nunn's staging of the play in the close arena of Stratford's small Other Place. All the actors sat around the charmed circle of the play's action, stepping on when their parts called for it, watching the action when it did not. There was great power in the presence of Lady Macbeth at the murder of Lady Macduff's son. The woman who said she would tear her own child from her nipple and dash it to the ground now saw something like that imagined scene made real. This helped explain her disintegration in the sleepwalking scene. Modern cinema could accomplish the same thing by showing the queen's imagination of the infanticide when she first heard of it. Shakespeare accomplished it by having one actor play both the self-violative mother and the cruelly violated Lady Macduff.

In the well-lit open condition of the theater in Shakespeare's time, audiences recognized a doubling actor in his new guise. In fact, their favorites were meant to be recognized—e.g., the comic actor Armin: the Porter's jokes were carried by a comic persona he had developed and made popular. The spectators would know he was also playing a witch. But they accepted the convention that a new costume created a new part—just as they accepted the convention that a boy was a woman. This made disguises “convincing” in a way that it is hard for modern audiences to accept. (It seems odd to us that Viola could be so readily taken as identical in appearance to Sebastian in Twelfth Night.)

But the piquancy of some doubling would strike an audience, even under those conditions. Others have noticed the appropriateness of King Lear's two loyal but truth-telling attendants, his quiet daughter, and his “allowed” satirist, being played by the same boy.

A similar increase in dramatic power comes from our seeing Lady Macbeth again only after Rice has played the womanly anguish of Lady Macduff. The impact of the sleepwalking scene was undoubtedly increased by that interval. We, in effect, fill up the void created by Lady Macbeth's absence with a communal female suffering. The fact that Lady Macduff was innocent and Lady Macbeth guilty just increases the pathos of the queen's repentance—for that, in effect, is what the scene amounts to. The first indication of this is the brief stage direction in the Folio: Enter Lady with a Taper. The punishment of a penitent witch involved her parading her crime by holding a taper (the symbol of witches' rites, which used candles as Catholic masses did, liturgically). Shakespeare made the Duchess of Gloucester submit to this form of “pillorying” in II Henry VI 2.4.17ff. The stage direction is: Enter the Duchess in a white Sheet, and a Taper burning in her hand. She tells her husband she is “mailed up in shame” by this penitential garb. We know this was the legal form of shaming, either before execution or (in lesser offences) as a substitute for it. The Chronicle of London describes the event Shakespeare put into his play:

Landed at the Temple Bridge out of her barge … [she] openly, barehead, with a kerchief on her head baring, she took a taper of wax of two pounds in her hand, and went so through Fleet Street, on her feet and hoodless, into Paul's, and there she offered up her taper at the high altar.

The Duchess was a repentant witch—and so, in her own mind, is Lady Macbeth. The stage direction names the taper, a huge one in the Duchess's case (two pounds, the size of the taper was gauged by the seriousness of the crime). There is a suggestion of something out of the ordinary in the Doctor's question: “How came she by that light?” The woman has told us the queen threw on her nightgown, and the scene is usually played barefoot, like the Duchess's. The taper-barefoot-sheet cluster said, to Shakespeare's audience, “repentant sorceress.”
And we have other indications of Lady Macbeth's sense of guilt. She never became a witch, like her husband; but she entertained witch fantasies, which have come back to haunt her. She acts like a witch when she tries to rub out or efface her “damn'd spot” (5.1.35). The bloody spot most feared by those suspected of witchcraft was the devil's mark left on them when they sealed their compact. Marlowe made much of this bloody sign when he had Faustus's blood congeal at the horror of what he was doing (A2.1.61-72). When at last the mark is made, it becomes a damned spot indeed, forming the words “Fly, man!” (Home fuge). Spots were evidence of the devil's ownership, a brand, a seal that could not be disowned. People arrested for witchcraft tried to cut or rub off any moles or blemishes that could be used against them. A Staffordshire investigator found that one Alice Gooderidge had “upon her belly a hole, of the bigness of two pence, fresh and bloody, as though some great wart had been cut off the place.”

Lady Macbeth, trying to rub out the sign of her guilt (while still holding the taper—there was no place to deposit it on the Jacobean stage as there is in modern productions), was a startling image of the captured witch. Her guilt made her act that role as she remembered the sight of “so much blood” streaming from Duncan's body. The image would soon be repeated when John Rice played Lucretia Borgia's repentance scene before her death in Barnes's play. Lucretia, too, sees the blood that streamed from her murdered husband, and cries out (lines 2283-88):

You see in my soul deformed blots.
Deliver me from that murthered man—
He comes to stab my soul! I murdered him.
O Gismond, Gismond, hide those bleeding wounds.
My soul bleeds drops of sorrow for thy sake.
Look not so wrathful! I am penitent!

Lucretia has been poisoned by her father, and her penitent death scene is contrasted with his despairing fall into the devil's clutches at the play's conclusion. Unlike Alexander or Faustus, she can still plead for forgiveness (lines 2312-15):

Merciful Father, let not Thy mercy pass!
Extend Thy mercy where no mercy was.
Merciful Father, for Thy Son's dear merit
Pardon my sinful soul. Receive my spirit.

Expirat Lucrece.

Shakespeare is more subtle than Barnes; but his sinning lady is also shown in penitent collapse, tortured by guilt and visions of blood. The pity of the physician, with his own hope for mercy, states indirectly the themes made blatant by Barnes: “Yet I have known those which have walk'd in their sleep who have died holily in their bed … God! God! Forgive us all!” (5.1.59-61, 75). It is a hope Macbeth, sealed up in the false confidence of his witches' assurance, has long ago forfeited. He must end like Pope Alexander, or Doctor Faustus—beyond repentance, defiant to the end.

Notes

1. Line counts for the various roles are taken from the tables in T. J. King, Casting Shakespeare's Plays: London Actors and Their Roles (Cambridge University Press, 1992). They come to 263 lines for Lady Macbeth, by contrast with 693 for Cleopatra and 557 for Portia.
2. Boy actors of the requisite diction, memory, and ability to sing and dance were hard to come by in the public theater, where their very presence was under continual assault by moralists (see Chapter 2, note 7). Good boy performers had a short time to learn and perfect their skills before losing the female parts when their voices changed. Shakespeare's great termagant roles of the early 1590s, and his roles for a matched comic pair (a tall boy and a short boy) in the middle nineties, indicate how Shakespeare
tailored parts for the troupe's apprentices—as he did for its clowns, and for Burbage himself.

3. See note 28 below.


6. Compare the coaching of Moth, the “pretty knavish page,” in *Love’s Labour’s* 5.2.98-99:

   Action and account did they teach him there.
   "Thus must thou speak," and "Thy body bear."


8. That Rice was still performing as a boy in 1610 means that he was probably no older than thirteen in 1607. The prime of a boy's acting years is illustrated in the case of John Honeyman, who played a woman in *The Roman Actor* when he was thirteen, and in *The Deserving Favorite* and *The Picture* when he was sixteen, but changed to an adult male part in *The Soddered Citizen* when he turned seventeen (King, op. cit., 77, 117, 119, 121, 122).

9. See Appendix One [Wills, Gary. *Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare’s Macbeth.*]

10. Antony twice calls Cleopatra a “witch” (at 4.2.37 and 4.12.47). Her soothsayer is called a male witch (1.2.40). Antony also calls her a “gypsy,” another word for witch (4.12.28), and cries, “These strong Egyptian fetters I must break” (1.2.116). For the connection of gypsy magic with Egypt, see Othello on his charmed handkerchief (3.4.56) and the reference to Egyptian magic at *Pericles* 3.2.84-86. Cleopatra is an “enchanting” figure (1.2.128) who makes Antony “the noble ruin of her magic” (3.10.18). Pompey describes her power over him (2.1.20-23):

   Salt Cleopatra, soften they wan'd lip!
   Let witchcraft join with beauty, lust with both.
   Tie up the libertine. …

   *Binding* and *tying* were the work of magic. Spells *chain* the enthralled—as Brabantio says Desdemona was charmed by Othello's spells (“if she in *chains* of magic were not bound,” *Othello* 1.2.65). Antony bids Cleopatra to “chain my arm'd neck,” to leap into his breast and ride on its panting sighs (4.8.14-16)—like a witch riding the air. See also Chapman, *Homers “Odysseys”* 10.500: “Dissolve the charms that their for’d forms enchain” (said of Circe's bewitchment of Odysseus' men).

11. *Macbeth* 1.5.43-46. The thickening of blood, to stop its flow, was attributed to the black “humor” that caused both melancholy and diabolic incursions into the human system. Cf. *King John* 3.2.42-43: “that surly spirit, Melancholy / Had bak'd thy blood and made it heavy, thick. …” The “baked blood” keeps out mirth in the *King John* passage, as it keeps out compunction in Lady Macbeth's dark prayer.


13. The witches hovered near Lady Macbeth in a 1964 Austrian production of the play (Rosenberg, 201). For the same actress doubling the Lady and Hecate, see ibid., 492.

14. For ministers as angels, see Isabella’s prayer at *Measure for Measure* 5.1.115: “Then, O you blessed ministers above. …” See also Laertes’s “A minis'tring angel shall my sister be” (*Hamlet* 5.1.248). For devils as ministers, see “minister of hell” at *I Henry VI* 5.4.93 and *Richard III* 1.2.46, and Sycorax’s “potent ministers” at *Tempest* 1.2.275. Prospero's intermediate spirits are “ministers of fate” (*Tempest* 3.3.61, 65, 87).

15. “Take” can mean “blast” or “wither,” a witch-usage as at *Merry Wives* 4.4.31 (the phantom “blasts the trees and *takes* the cattle”) or *Hamlet* 1.1.163-64, on the blessed Christmas time:
Or the verb can mean *take in exchange for*—her milk becomes the watery “gall” that ran when witches' marks were cut into. A witch named Alice Samuels had her mark cut open in 1593, and it ran “yellow with milk and water,” then clear (non-white) “milk,” then blood. See C. L'Estrange Ewen, *Witchcraft and Demonianism* (Heath Cranton Ltd., 1933), 173.

16. See *Newes from Scotland* (1591): “the Devil doth generally mark them with a privy mark, by reason the witches have confessed themselves that the Devil doth lick them with his tongue in some privy part of their body before he doth receive them to be his servants” (Barbara Rosen, *Witchcraft in England: 1558-1618* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 194).

17. Joan fed several devils at once, since witches often had multiple mole-teats. Margaret Wyard confessed in 1645 that “she had seven imps like flies, dors [bees], spiders, mice, and she had but five teats, and when they came to suck, they fight like pigs with a sow.” C. L'Estrange Ewen, *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials* (Kegan Paul, 1929), 306. Since devils were bodiless spirits, they could appear to men only if they created phantasms of “thick air,” spoke through dead human bodies, or used live animals' bodies. They could use human semen in incubus-intercourse, but they had to take it from animals' bodies to have real physical coupling. When Lady Macbeth invokes the murthering ministers' “sightless [invisible] substances” at 1.5.49, she is referring to demons who have not taken familiars' animal bodies.

18. They also use their familiars to suck the life from others—the fair Rosamund was killed by toads, acting under orders from their witch. See George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Atheneum, 1972), 182-83. The conjurer-pope in Barnes's play uses serpents at the breast to kill his pederastic victims (lines 2770-89). The evil Queen Elinor in Peele's *Edward I* (lines 2094-96) kills a critic of her acts the same way.

19. Compare the “fatal raven” of *Titus* 2.3.97.

20. King John in the play is given two portents (two *adynata*) to assure him, just as Macbeth was. John will not fall until stones fight men and birds defeat armies. Then, to a deafening clamor of birds sent ahead of the French army, the earth is darkened and the English army breaks and runs, done in by “a flight of ugly ravens.” Cf. *The Raigne of King Edward III*, edited by Fred Lapides (Garland Publishing, 1980). The ravens “made at noon a night unnatural / Upon the quaking and dismayed world”—like “night's predominance … When living light should kiss [the earth] at *Macbeth* 3.4.8-9. The ravens fly in “corner'd squares,” like the “brave squares of battle” at *Antony* 3.11.4 or “our squares of battle” at *Henry V* 4.2.28. For the possibility of Shakespearean authorship, see Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare as Collaborator* (Barnes & Noble, 1960), 10-55, and Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion* (Clarendon Press, 1987), 136-37.

21. Harpy, from Greek *harpazein*, to snatch, corresponded with the Jacobean word “gripe” for carrion birds. (This word is used for Seneca's *vultur* in the Elizabethan translations.) “Harpyr” at *I Tamburlaine* 2.7.56 is emended to “harpy” by Marlowe's editors.


26. Ibid.

27. None of the plays Shakespeare's troupe acted in the 1606-07 Christmas-to-Lent season needs more than three boys. In *Macbeth*, if Hecate appeared with three *boys* as the witches, that would make four women on the stage at once—an additional reason for concluding that the witches were played by men. The first witch would most likely be played by the expert in grotesque roles, Robert Armin, who would also double the Porter. In only two scenes are two boy actors on the stage at the same
time—Lady Macduff with her son, and the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth with her woman attendant. In widely separated scenes, the same boy could play Macduff’s son and the woman attendant. The shortage of boy actors in the public theater could be filled in private performances, where choristers were recruited for the large number of female roles in (for instance) *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But in the festive calendar of the 1606-07 “twelve days of Christmas,” choirs and boy performers would have their own events to prepare for, making them unavailable to the public players.

28. For Poel’s Rule, see David Bradley, *From Test to Performance in the Elizabethan Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 18. This forbids the most famous thematic doubling of the modern stage—Peter Brook’s use of the same pair of actors to play Theseus with Hippolyta and Oberon with Titania. It does not interfere with the most famous supposed doubling, that of Cordelia and the Fool in *King Lear*. The long absence of each character from the action is hard to explain except by doubling. According to this theory, Lear’s calling Cordelia his fool at 5.3.305 is an author’s slip that confuses the actor’s two roles. See Richard Abrams, “The Double Casting of Cordelia and Lear’s Fool,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 27 (1985): 354-77. Armin, the regular fool, could play the grotesque part of “mad” Edgar.


30. The shortage of boy actors helps explain another overworked mystery of the play—why Lady Macbeth’s child or children do not appear. (Macduff’s anguished “He has no children” is said to Malcolm, at that moment giving him cold comfort.) When Lady Macbeth says she has given suck, there is no reason to doubt her. Her husband says “Bring forth men-children only” (1.7.72)—something he could not say if she had already brought forth a girl child, but could if she had borne at least one son. Macbeth’s frenzy at the thought of Banquo’s heirs inheriting would be baseless if Macbeth had no heir to be supplanted. The progeny are mentioned but not dwelt on as a matter of theatrical economy. The same consideration explains why one child stands for Macduff’s “children” in the murder scene (4.2).


32. See, for instance, *Newes from Scotland* (in Rosen, op. cit., 193): “They, suspecting that she had been marked by the Devil, as commonly witches are, made diligent search about her and found the Enemy’s mark to be in her forecrag (or forepart) of her throat. Which being found, she confessed. …”

33. C. L'Estrange Ewen, *Witchcraft*, 177. Even birthmarks could be a sign of a curse on certain people's offspring—like Richard III's portentous teeth formed in the womb (*Richard III* 4.4.49) or the “Vicious mole in nature” of the *Hamlet* Quarto (1.4.24) that predisposes its bearer to evil. Some held that people were marked at their birth hour by their stars' influence, and the astrologer Simon Forman noted his clients' markings when casting their horoscope—for instance: “She hath a wart or mole in the pit of her throat, or near it … She hath a wart under her right cheek” (Simon documents in A. L. Rowse, *Sex and Society in Shakespeare’s Age* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 100, 207). The magic avoidance of such blots is the gift of Oberon to the offspring of Theseus and Hippolyta (*Midsummer Night’s Dream* 5.1.395-400):

And the blots of Nature's hand
Shall not in their issue stand.
Never mole, harelip, nor scar,
Nor marks prodigious, such as are
Despised in nativity,
Shall upon their children be.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Owen E. Brady (review date 1996)**

In the following review of a 1995 adaptation of Macbeth performed at the Zen Zen Zo theater in Kyoto, Brady discusses the expressionistic power of this bilingual English/Japanese performance and identifies several of the production's stylistic flaws.

Seized by students in the 1960s and run by them still, Kyoto University's Seibu Kodo stands isolated in a pitted, unpaved lot strewn with refuse. This is the ramshackle headquarters for Zen Zen Zo, a theatrical experiment in cross-cultural form. A multinational troupe directed by Australian Simon Woods, Zen Zen Zo has experimented for three years with fusing Japanese performance techniques and classical Western theatre texts. Something new results: a performance text that might best be called a Butoh meditation on a Western classic.

With Shakespeare's Macbeth as metatext this season, the troupe's Japanese, Australian, and American actors created a performance text distilling Macbeth's deep and dark desires into a raw, expressionistic, Butoh-inspired hell broth of horror and fatality. With Shakespeare's text cut and fragmented into thematic shards of language, the production relies heavily on the human form, dance, and composer Colin Webber's driving, percussive music to communicate Macbeth's slide into hell. Supporting characters and plot lines have been pared away, revealing Macbeth's mythical core. To give symmetry to the bilingual aspects of the performance, there are four witches—two speaking in English, two in Japanese.

Inspired by Shakespeare's bloody man motif, the opening sequence uses images and nonverbal sounds, creating a lurid image of a man in hell. Macbeth, played by Hideyuki Hiraoka, appears sculpted in red light, shrouded in fog. To pulsing, percussive music and guttural sounds, he breaks from his frozen pose and moves a bamboo staff through a fluid series of slow-motion gestures, recalling both Butoh and the heroic poses of Kabuki samurai. In tattered black slips, the witches crawl through the audience hunting their prey. With Macbeth still upstage, they form a chorus downstage, performing a lewd, frenetic come-on. Thrusting hips and breasts frantically forward, then suddenly squatting obscenely, they tantalize and appall Macbeth, while chanting phrases from Shakespeare's text, alternately in Japanese and English.

As an expressionistic interpretation of character, this production elevates the witches' role. They are always present: often foregrounded downstage; sometimes twining themselves around characters; occasionally upstage observing, wrapped around the stark wickets of the stage design. When Macbeth and Banquo encounter them, the witches dance their prophecies; and Macbeth stands, eyes growing wildly wide, as the seeds of ambition take root. Macbeth delivers soliloquies contemplating the king's death in Japanese with the witches, sometimes crawling up his legs like serpents, repeating key phrases in English, representing his inner tension. Later, as the dagger surfaces in Macbeth's mind, they ensnare him in a net of bamboo staves. As emanations of his lust for power, they dance a ritual murder of the king while Macbeth kneels downstage in darkness bent by the music's driving percussion.

Lady Macbeth, too, serves expressionistic ends, more an emanation of Macbeth than an independent character. Throughout, the production links Macbeth, his partner, and the witches, creating a union of evil. He remains on stage as she reads his letter about the prophecies. Stripping the text to the “unsex me here” speech completes the chain of evil, linking Lady Macbeth visually with the witches. In a slow-motion recapitulation of their squatting earlier, she intones her lines about infernal motherhood. Helen Smith's Lady Macbeth squats as if to ditch deliver evil into the world; hands become claws as she encourages the murdering ministers to take her milk for gall. The sleepwalking scene turns into a ballet for the damned. Intoning only “Out, damned spot,” Smith's Lady Macbeth pirouettes into hell to percussive piano and drums, while the witches mouth fragments of her speech, English echoing Japanese. During Macbeth's “tomorrow” soliloquy, she remains on stage. Standing midway on a runway slanting from the back of the auditorium to the stage, Macbeth groans in Japanese while Lady Macbeth, arms outstretched, hovers above him, echoing his soliloquy in English like an infernal benediction on her doomed husband.
What is striking about this production is the power it draws from its roughness, the pulsing musical score, and the group's commitment to experimentation. An avowed experiment in cross-cultural cross-fertilization, it has what by conventional standards might be called artistic flaws. For example the banquet scene unsuccessfully mixes comedy and horror in a kind of youthful nose-thumbing at the Ur-text's sacrosanct cultural status. But even this overindulgence in conflicting effects reflects the group's vitality and commitment to a style that is internationalist in perspective because it is “beyond words.”

This performance strives for the elemental power of myth to comment on the contemporary scene. Stripping Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to essentials, it presents an icon of human depravity, a character daring to be more than a man, devoid of pathos, unclouded by morality. It transforms Shakespeare's *Macbeth* through bilingual collages, Butoh techniques, and music, into a fast moving, visceral reflection of the primitive, pan-cultural desire for power. The simple bamboo staves used effectively throughout as agents of destruction and fate are universalizing signs suggesting the technological extensions of power whether swords, AK-47s, sarin gas, or plastic explosives. In the process, this performance reminds us that Sarajevo, Tokyo, and Oklahoma City are all worlds where Macbeth's avatars walk with ravishing stride.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Irena R. Makaryk (review date 1998)**


*In the following review, Makaryk describes avant-garde Ukrainian director Les' Kurbas's 1924 modernistic, anti-bourgeois production of Macbeth, citing its ironic and expressionistic methods and stylized form.*

In an interview in *Gambit* in 1970, Edward Bond remarked that, as a society, “we use the play [King Lear] in a wrong way. And it's for that reason I would like to rewrite it so that we now have to use the play for ourselves, for our society, for our time, for our problems.”1 For Bond, “wrong” Shakespeare is academic Shakespeare, while “right” Shakespeare is a transformed and contemporary Shakespeare. Bond's clear-cut division of approaches to Shakespeare is quintessentially modernist in its rejection of “museum” Shakespeare in favour of a reworked classic for our time. His division of approaches into right and wrong also points to the main line of argument I wish to explore in relation to one particular production: the idea of style—the central issue of modernism—as not just an interpretive and ideological tool but also a moral one. The area of my special interest is the early Soviet period.

Within the general trend of modernizing Shakespeare in the West from the 1960s on, *Macbeth* has been the “trademark” avant-garde play, its primitivism and anarchism being particularly attractive characteristics. These are also some of the obvious attractions of this play for the high modernist period. In 1924, the great Soviet Ukrainian director Les' Kurbas (1887-1937) conceived of a production of *Macbeth* in terms almost identical to those of Edward Bond. Kurbas wrote that “Our approach to Shakespeare naturally must be the approach of our day. The restoration of Shakespeare in the manners and customs of his time is formally impossible and in essence unnecessary. The whole value of the scenic embodiment of a classical work in our day lies namely in the ability to present a work in the refraction of the prism of the contemporary world view.”2 For Kurbas, it was particularly important that the performance not “decline” into literature but that it remain theatre. The text should therefore remain only one of the materials at the disposal of the creative actor; it was to be a tool, not a tyrant.

A polymath, Oleksandr (Les') Zenon Stepanovych Kurbas was an actor, director, playwright, translator, pedagogue, theorist, cinematographer, musician, and costume designer. Himself an “epoch” in the Ukrainian theatre—as one of his contemporaries referred to him3—Kurbas influenced hundreds of artists involved with the theatrical and cinematographic arts. Introducing Shakespeare into Ukraine after a century of tsarist
prohibitions, Kurbas prepared four plays (Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, Othello, King Lear) and did preliminary work on five others (Hamlet, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Twelfth Night, Timon of Athens, Antony and Cleopatra), intending, eventually, to produce the whole Shakespearean canon; however, the only play which was actually staged in its entirety was Macbeth. Kurbas produced four variants of the play, the fourth of which, staged in 1924, was the most radical. Before proceeding further, it is perhaps necessary and useful to explain that I regard the avant-garde as both a radical, ground-breaking offshoot of modernism focussed on experimentation and process and, also, as the expression of a left-wing political stance aimed at the total repudiation of bourgeois culture. In Eastern Europe this repudiation meant the rejection, for the first time, of “the national character and didactic pathos of earlier literature,” as well as the erasure, as in other, Western modernist projects, of the boundaries between art forms and genres, between “high” and “low.”

This double task may be seen in the work of Kurbas; thus, in his view, his 1924 production was both left and right; that is, inspired by a left-wing ideology but thoroughly “correct” in its view and use of Shakespeare.

Shortly after the première of Kurbas's Macbeth, one of the actors in the production, Vasyl' Vasyl'ko, recorded in his diary that a “bomb went off, throwing such sparks into the audience that even on the second and the third day [all of] Kyiv shouted ‘gvalt’” From the point of view of Vasyl'ko and many of the actors, as well as a good portion of the audience, Macbeth was a tremendous success, as the thundering ovations indicated. But not everyone loved the production. Those critics who detested the production accused Kurbas of “sacrilege,” “vivisection” and serious “error.” Why did this production elicit such sharply-polarized responses? In interviewing theatrical historians in 1995 in Kyiv, I was surprised to learn that even today this production has many detractors. What was it about the style which led critics then and now to categorize it in moral and religious terms as “wrong” and “blasphemous”?

First, let's consider the production:

The Macbeth which opened on 2 April, 1924 presented a full-frontal attack on the illusionist theatre. Disruptions, contrasts, juxtapositions, minimalist costumes, montages of stage action, atonal music—these were to help ironize the moral tale of an ambitious man. Kurbas employed various techniques to create a cubist expressionist production, which would reflect his beliefs about audience, actor, and art work. A self-conscious creation of fragments to be re-assembled by the spectator, this production (as one of the sympathetic critics observed), intended to kill the remnants of the bourgeois theatre.

While only twenty-three pages of the director's copy have survived, they reveal a consistency in their cuts; these appear to be excisions aimed at simplifying the emotional range of the play by omitting small choral scenes and, most importantly, by eliminating Macbeth's heroic concluding speech. The whole production was austere and harsh. In Vadym Meller, the artistic director, Kurbas discovered a like-minded friend and colleague who shared his artistic interests and could translate them into reality. Like Kurbas, Meller studied in the West. After a very successful first exhibition, he had been invited to show his works in the Salon d'Automne together with Picasso, Gris and Bracque. For the 1924 Macbeth, Meller created enormous placards (4 × 4 meters high), bright green shields of stretched canvas, on which giant modernist red block letters announced “Castle,” “Precipice” (the translator's word for “heath”), and so forth, recalling both medieval-renaissance locality boards, and contemporary political posters. Their starkness urged the audience to creative completion: to imagining what each of these locations might be like. Their size dwarfed the actors, and diminished their usual centrality on stage, suggesting that the characters were subject to forces other than their own individual wills, to other discourses, interpretations, and frames. Raised or lowered when needed at the sound of a gong, the screens served as more than background. Lowered at the same time, they indicated the simultaneity of the action in different parts of Scotland. At other times, they moved in slow, stately rhythm to underscore the emotions of the lead actors, to emphasize tension, the dynamics of the action, or even to interfere in the action—as, for example, when they physically blocked off Macbeth's attempt to follow Banquo's ghost—represented by a searchlight beam. Fragments of furniture, chairs, and a throne were, like the screens, lowered and raised when needed. The actors were often lit by the harsh light of projectors, and
moved in a “restrained” way, and the whole rhythm of the production followed this general style.  

Like the stylized and bare stage which both suggested place and yet also mocked any such certainty, so the costumes were spare and theatrical, emphasizing the duality of the actors (as characters and as people) and of their time frame (both time present and past). Wearing either militarized garb or contemporary work clothes very like those worn by many people in the audience, the actors were distinguished from them by only a few ancillary articles: stylized bits of medieval or renaissance clothing, such as tunics and cloaks, decorated with appliques in a modernist interpretation of heraldic designs.

At the centre of this production was the “naked” actor—the major experiment in this version of Macbeth. Kurbas’s challenge to the actors was to display the perfection of their technique by turning their roles “on” and “off” at will. The pure craft of acting was laid bare without the attendant “mysteries” of sustained, realistic character, illusory sets, grand costumes, extensive music, and numerous props. In renaissance fashion and with similar effect, actors’ roles were doubled or tripled. Thus Yosyp Hirniak, for example, played Donalbain, the Murderer of Banquo, and the Doctor; each role carried over associations from the previous one, contributing to the spreading of guilt in the realm, and limiting the audience’s habit of dividing the characters into goodies and baddies. The mechanism of acting itself was openly displayed: each actor came on stage at his or her own pace, sometimes greeting the audience, and assuming his role only when he was properly positioned. Similarly, after performing his part, the actor exited as “himself.” Thus, in the first scene, the witches came on stage wearing wide blue-grey trousers and red wigs. Mysterious little electrical lights flickered in their costumes and around their eyes when they uttered their prophecies. A surreal violet blue light was used to emphasize their horrible grimaces. Like priests, they held censors in their hands, thus immediately announcing the bitingly satirical thread of the interpretation. But, after this eerie scene, the screen with the word “Precipice” disappeared from sight, the violet light vanished, and the witches calmly left the stage as actresses who have done their “number.”

The sleepwalking scene was performed with the same emphasis on actor in and out of role. Liubov Hakkebush proceeded to centre stage, where she placed her candle, took off her mantle, shook her head until her long dark hair tumbled around her shoulders, and only then proceeded emotionally to “Out, damned spot!” Similarly, after Macbeth delivered his powerful soliloquy in Act I, scene vii, he seized his dagger and turned to go to kill Duncan. Taking a few steps, he resumed his identity as Ivan Mar’ianenko the actor.

The “on-off” principle was repeated again and again in the production, thus isolating and drawing attention to key moments in the play, as well as to the points of transition—forcing the audience and the actor to a cerebral response to the play, to a focus on the constituent parts of theatre. Every aspect of the production was placed in quotation marks, every theatrical convention was questioned, including the idea of the tragic hero. The traditionally heroic Macbeth was portrayed by Ivan Mar’ianenko (hitherto noted for his tragic roles) as a common, unimaginative soldier, dressed in contemporary clothes, including sloppy puttees. This Macbeth combined simplicity of character with single-minded cruelty; his doubts were not indicative of a conscience, but were rather a revelation of his fearfulness, a fearfulness revealed right after the regicide, when he threw himself at his wife with the very same knife he used to murder the king. Duncan was presented as a drunken fool, whose death at first seemed, if not deserved, then at least not completely reprehensible. Both Macbeth and his wife counted on the fact that most of Scotland would not discover their crimes, and the knowing rest would keep silent out of fear. (The resemblance to Stalin’s future institutionalization of terror, and the
population’s fearful, silent compliance seems uncanny in the whole interpretation.)

Lady Macbeth was more austere than her husband. Not a romantic young beauty, but a mature woman without passion for her husband—who seemed, rather, to annoy her with his fearfulness—Lady Macbeth was ugly and sharp-featured, in love only with power and herself. When Macbeth left to kill Duncan, she followed him, comfortably holding the dagger like a practiced killer. The Macbeths were understood as products of their time—a Scottish Middle Ages which Kurbas interpreted as inherently and instinctually spiritually hollow and cruel.

The only moment which contained a remnant of traditional tragedy was the sleepwalking scene. Dressed in white, Hakkebush seems Ophelia-like in photos taken of this scene. While in the rest of the production she was costumed in restrictive, unattractive clothing (a dark, shapeless three-quarter length robe over a white shift, pleated at the bottom, vaguely recalling a Ukrainian peasant’s costume), and a severe headpiece (a white kerchief held in place by a metal band), in this scene, she wore only the long white shift over which cascaded her long, unfettered hair. Robbed of the dignity of her usual severity, she was subject to the hallucination of an imminent assassination on herself. The consequences of her past cruelty were apparent in the stark contrast to previous scenes. Here, she was palpably terror-stricken by her inability to achieve real power or to control events. That this was not a scene of pathos is suggested by the response of the drama critic I. Turkel’taub, who faulted Hakkebush for being too mannered and her acting too “cold.”

Grappling towards a new relationship with the audience, Kurbas wished to break down drama into its constituent subsystems, forcing the audience both to re-examine the individual materials of the theatre and then to re-constitute them into a new whole. He employed some devices to destroy traditional audience expectations and engagement (as, for example, the “on-off” device), while others were to draw the audience in at moments when they least expected it. Thus, for example, he had the witches wired so that small electric lights lit up as they moved in their deliberately exaggerated “witchy” way. But, when it came for Banquo and Macbeth to speak to the weird sisters, the witches were lit up from behind, casting huge shadows onto the audience. The thanes spoke to these shadows and thus to the audience which, after being alienated and amused by the odd beings, now just as suddenly found itself implicated in the dark world of Macbeth.

The closest link between actor and contemporary audience was provided by major additions to the text: three intermedia and dumb shows. The Porter (played by Ambrosii Buchma), called the Fool in Kurbas’s production, appeared in the intervals between the acts. During the first interval, Buchma was dressed in fool’s cap and traditional fool’s clothing, with exaggerated make-up, including a bulbous nose which occasionally lit up. The Porter’s costume clearly linked him to the Old Vice of medieval drama, the attendant of the Devil—a connection confirmed and developed in an additional mimed sequence following Act 1 scene 3 (that is, just after Macbeth and Banquo first encounter the witches) in which cardinals cavorted on the stage and then turned into devils by the simple process of revealing their cowls on which were painted devilish faces.

Buchma as Porter performed clownish tricks, acrobatic jumps and dance-steps, after which he always spoke with individual members of the audience. In her memoirs, fellow actor Natalia Pylypenko compared Buchma to a rubber ball, which flew across the stage, seemingly weightless and unpredictable, at one time flying up to the ceiling, at another descending by the trap door and shooting up again. Buchma made seemingly impromptu speeches on contemporary political and social issues (such as the deposition of the Tsar, the League of Nations, various religious superstitions, even backstage theatrical disputes)—these were Kurbas’s analogy to Shakespeare’s references to the Jesuits’ equivocations. Every day, the director insisted, the jokes and references had to be changed. The actor Stepan Bodnarchuk was responsible for transforming items in the morning newspaper into couplets by nightfall. In this, as in other elements of the theatricality of the production, Kurbas was consciously reaching back to the rich, old medieval and renaissance traditions of the audience-actor relationships. In permitting the Fool some creative freedom, Kurbas was also consciously drawing upon English fools like Will Kempe renowned for his impromptu conversations with the audience.
and his extempore comic remarks. Buchma shared with Kempe the lively combination of acrobatics, wit and physical clowning.

In the fourth act, during the intermedia referred to as “Haymaking,” Buchma entered as a Peasant, reaping energetically as he went and singing a harvest song. Here, from the scenes of bloody-mindedness, Kurbas moved the audience in a Shakespearean manner to consider the apparently undisturbed (or compliant) common man. Rather than any sentimental or folkloric association, the simplicity of the peasant’s task both contrasted with the violent, over-the-top actions of the main characters, but also connected them. For, of course, the Reaper was also the Grim Reaper, mowing down “the rays of light, [and] extinguishing them with his broad sweeps.”24 Fatigued by the work, he would then approach members of the audience sitting on bleachers in front of him and take cigarettes from them; thus he connected the main plot and the intermedia to reality itself.

The Fool’s third and last appearance occurred in the final moments of the play, when Macduff comes out carrying the head of Macbeth. Still wearing his Fool’s makeup—the mocking, grinning face—Buchma came in costumed as a bishop, in gold tiara and white soutane. He then crowned Malcolm to the solemn music of an organ ironized by the delicate sounds of the piccolo and the rougher harmonium. Just as he did so, a new pretender approached, killed the kneeling Malcolm, and took the crown. Without pause, the bishop once again intoned the same words, “There is no power, but from God.” As the new king began to rise, a new pretender murdered him, and the ritual was repeated once again.25

The mixture of burlesque, acrobatics, buffonery, and Grand Guignol—linked to Futurism and Dadaism of the West—was intended to focus attention on and interrogate the material and form of the theatre most radically by employing a world classic—hence a text regarded with some piety. While in some quarters the production was acclaimed as a “great triumph” and a work of genius,26 in others, it was simply “a scandal.”27 The Kyivan audience, which had recently endured a Macbeth-like period of rapid and bloody exchanges of power (eleven between 1917 and 1920), was forced to exercise a very renaissance type of activity. This “history” play induced the spectators simultaneously to apprehend Ukraine, Shakespeare’s England, and Macbeth’s Scotland. Shakespeare was their contemporary. Was he also their prophet? Whom was the production satirizing? Whom was it destroying? How were the issues of conscience, power, loyalty, treason, silent complicity, and destruction of innocence supposed to be interpreted in 1924 with the recently (21 January 1924) dead Lenin, and with the backroom power struggles which ensued? How could it be that the bloodiness and ineffectualness of the Tsar (Duncan) was, in the end, indistinguishable from the Soviet power that took his place (the Macbeths and the Malcolm’s of the world)? Where was the morality of the new regime? Was it possible that regicide was neither romantic nor heroic, and that evil was simply banal, repeatable, and unconnected to ideology?

Kurbas’s intention—to problematize all the elements of theatre (the classic, plot, role, character, hero, time, space, acting, prop, costume)—was, as I have already mentioned, an attempt to re-conceive the whole notion of theatre. In his view, this was the only right way of going about the task of creating a new Soviet Ukrainian culture. Whether one considers him a naive convert to the new order or an aesthetic idealist, Kurbas believed that the struggle had to be, could only be, the struggle to reinvent all systems; and this aim could only be achieved by constant experimentation. The avant-garde style was intended to make audiences think critically and to unite them in analytical thought through their complicity in the action. Devices which broke down the conventional barrier between stage and audience, actor and character, were, in Kurbas’s logic, rupture on behalf of a new communion. But this harmony could only be achieved by the special cooperation of the audience which had to fill in the hermeneutical gaps. It required then, not a suspension of disbelief, but a very special and shared belief—a belief in the possibility of forms emptied of traditional associations and codes in order that they be recreated and filled with something entirely new.
Contemporary critics and spectators unsympathetic to modernism focussed on the discontinuity and unpredictability of the production. They found it cold, exclusionary, elitist. Even with his pre-production articles, puffs, and his brief statement of purpose before the curtain, Kurbas was not entirely successful at creating the kind of new audience-actor relationship he intended. The vociferous polemic launched in the press (which lasted over two months) was in part a debate about the modernist style and its relationship to the notion of the classic. Kurbas was accused of “blasphemy” in his treatment of Shakespeare, of completely annulling a theatrical classic, of presenting a “cold” and unfeeling production, of showing life as it shouldn’t be, instead of how it should. Shakespeare in his hands, according to the critics, was simply Mr. Wrong.

But what was “right” Shakespeare? In an article castigating the production, Iakiv Savchenko defined the “correct” tradition of staging Shakespeare as, first of all, a realistic recreation of Elizabethan theatre; secondly, as a tradition of strong actors playing in a heroic-romantic style; and, lastly, as a production which centers all the attention on the main characters. “Right” Shakespeare, then, appeared to be very close to old traditions and conventions of the commercial theatre. Savchenko’s prescriptions suggest the unity between audience and stage of a simple garden variety based on the idea of the stage as representing reality or, more accurately, a heightened reality. The idea of style as potentially wrong or right seemed to rest on the bedrock of a particular understanding of community and, further, on the strength of the social fabric. Considering itself under ideological siege from within and from without (not having yet recovered from world war, civil war and revolution), the “right-thinking” Bolshevik polemicists of the Soviet Union in 1924 had little tolerance for a notion of theatre (or art) that was not unifying or celebratory of great deeds. Ironically, in a country in which God was proclaimed dead, only moral and religious terms could be found to convey the depth of their condemnation of modernist Shakespeare.

Curiously (from Kurbas’s point of view), his peers also attacked his Macbeth for being too bourgeois, for taking the “bourgeois aesthetic” to its “absurd” conclusion by not reflecting objective reality but only hinting at it, by presenting a system of signs, marks and ideas instead of concrete reality; and, finally, for creating overly abstract forms. Art for art's sake—the principle which really was under attack here—was a movement that did not strike deep roots in the East, where art had always generally been approached from an ethical (religious or social) perspective. The critics' offensives were, in part, a reflex regression to ethical models of criticism developed over the past two centuries (and perhaps most notoriously found in Tolstoy's critique of Shakespeare). The traditional, ethical approach to the arts also fed naturally into the new political terminology of error, heresy and deviation.

The Futurist Mykhail Semenko correctly pinpointed the cultural crisis of his time as a crisis of theory. With little thought given to the part culture would play in the Revolution, its leaders had no consistent cultural policy, let alone a theory. Lenin's only interest in culture, for example, was exhibited by his insistence that cities be plastered with slogans and that statues be erected to revolutionary leaders. The latter in particular evoked the most conservative of tsarist and neoclassical cultural habits. The avant-garde was appalled. But this conservatism or regression was of a piece with other kinds of turnings-back. For the Commissar of the Enlightenment, Anatolii Lunacharsky, as for Lenin, the classics were national property and thus to be tampered with at peril. Lunacharsky's slogan, “new content in old forms”—must have given the modernists pause in their belief in a new order, as must have the critic Turkel'taub's slogan, “Backwards in art and culture.”

In the 1920s, the rhetoric of morality—modernism was wrong and destructive (Kurbas called it “cheap demagoguery”)—soon drowned out intellectual debate. The unpredictability of modernism and its apparently cyclical view of history could hardly co-exist for long within a new, official master narrative: the story of “scientific,” inexorable progress toward a new paradise on earth. In such a narrative, in which the answers were already known, what point could experimentation possibly serve? Among the first to welcome the Revolution, the avant-garde had few allies. Dismissive of the old ethnographic school, of the bourgeois and much of the intelligentsia, the Ukrainian avant-garde worked itself into a political corner from which, by the 1930s, there was little possibility of escape.
The 1920s debate concerning Macbeth usefully points out many of the broader difficulties with modernist Shakespeare and the modernist project—at least in Ukraine. While modernism provides freedom in opening up space and, especially, time, and attempts simultaneously to distance and to draw in, often only its discontinuities and ruptures are immediately evident. By contrast, the mimetic approach to the theatre, although only a convention and without objective validity is, as Benjamin Bennett astutely pointed out, a “communal initiative”: “if the realistic begins by being discredited, if it is recognized from the outset as mere convention, then the conscious decision to accept that convention is undoubtedly communicative, shared with others, a communal process.” What is crucial, then, continues Bennett, “is not meaning, but style as the token of an ethical decision repeatedly taken in the theater.”

Conservative, academic or commercial theatre with its apparently easy acceptance of “ordinary reality” thus functions in a seemingly harmonious manner; it provides a readily identifiable common ground for actor and audience. Such a desire for clearly-defined and understood concepts of communion was most obviously found in the first years of the Revolution. Thus, Nikolai Evreinov's staging of The Storming of the Winter Palace on the third anniversary of the October Revolution with at least 8,000 participants and 100,000 spectators (whose participation, observes Lars Kleberg, “was merely a question of degree rather than kind”) was both an expression of this conflation of life and art and a harbinger of things to come. Inspired by the artistic precedents created during the French Revolution and by the ideas of Richard Wagner and Romain Rolland, such huge spectacles, mass festivals and glorifications of revolutionary leaders, it is true, did not last very long. But that does not mean that the desire for such “realism” and the communion which underlied it disappeared; rather, it found a less obvious outlet in the theatre's return to “realism” as the officially approved approach to art in the Soviet Union.

Rather than foreground the audience-actor connection, Kurbas's modernist productions presumed that the audience wished to co-create a new ground for interpretation and communion while creating a semiotic earthquake where nothing remained stable or certain. Modernism optimistically endowed the audience with the desire to work while at play, to think critically and to question in an individual way in order to achieve a long-term project of a new community. Thus, for many Ukrainian modernists, it was commonplace to think of the theatre as the church of literature, the best expression of collective ceremonial thinking. Here, we may see that the modernists themselves reverted to religious and, in other cases, to moral terms. For both camps, this emotion-laden terminology revealed the deeply-engrained belief in the monumentality and potency of the classic for our culture.

Yet modernism was also deeply skeptical of its communicative tools and signifying practices, as the interrogations of Kurbas showed. Using rhetoric while also drawing attention to its manipulations, modernism had enormous political and subversive force—a fact which goes some way to explaining both Hitler's and Stalin's detestation of it.

Modernism's idealistic conception of the audience and its occlusion of the psychology of viewing—the perhaps overwhelming need for harmony, what we really like in mimesis—doomed Ukrainian modernist productions to a specialized or special audience. It is perhaps not surprising, after all, that, in 1995, Ukrainian theatrical historians remained uncomfortable with what one critic called Kurbas's “fireworks,” his “whimsies,” his too intellectual, too contemporary production. Tired of political interpretations of plays and anxious to rejoin the European community, Ukrainian theatrical artists and critics seem, at the moment, happiest with a psychological realism.

Notes

2. “Do postanovky ‘Makbeta’ v 4 maisterni M.O.B. (rozmova z Kurbasom),” *Bil'shovyk* (Kyiv) 1 April 1924: n.p. All translations are mine.
5. Vasyl' Vasyli'ko, *Shchodennyk* [unpublished diary], vol. 5, 1 January 1923 to 14 May 1924, MS 10369, State Museum of Theatrical Arts and Cinema (Kyiv).
6. Numerous reviews and memoirs attest to this view. A representative view is Ia[kiv] S[avchenko]'s “Shakespir dybom,” *Bil'shovyk* (Kyiv), No. 76 (974) 4 April 1924: 6.
7. Although various scholars cite the opening of the play as 1 April 1924, in fact, according to Vasyl' Vasyli'ko's diary, it did not open until 2 April, because the costumes were not ready. On 2 April, even as the performance was proceeding, the costumes were still being completed.
10. Meller is the father of constructivism on the Ukrainian stage and was responsible for some of Kurbas's most inventive, original stage designs. He turned to stage design after his paintings were destroyed during World War I; his theatrical *début* took place in 1918. See V. Kucherenko, *Vadym Meller, 1884-1962* (Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1975) for a beautiful catalogue of his surviving works.
11. Virlana Tkacz argues that these may have been influenced by silent movies. See Virlana Tkacz, “Les [sic] Kurbas's Use of Film Language in his Stage Productions of *Jimmie Higgins* and *Macbeth*,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 36.1 (March, 1990): 59-76. Also see Iona Shevchenko, *Suchasnyi ukrains'kyi teatr* (Kharkiv: Derzhavne vydavnytstvo Ukrainy, 1929), 83, who argues that the notion of *peretvorennia* is linked to methods of cinematographic montage. He cites Eisenstein and his notion of “an attraction” in this relation.
14. Hirniak noted that the work of Viktor Shklovskyi was widely read by the members of *Berezil*.
20. So, at least, my examination of the photos in the archival collection of the State Museum of Theatrical Art and Cinema seemed to me. In one, Hakkebush faces the viewer in a close-up which shows her heavily-made up eyes, and her whole face shrinking in terror from something. In the second photo, looking beautiful and innocent, she carries a light in front of her in her outstretched hand. This is the only photo extant which I have examined which shows her in an upright posture, her head back, her long hair streaming behind her. In other photos from the earlier parts of the play, she is never upright, always stylized in her movements, and usually hunched over, whether reading the letter from Macbeth, walking with him, or responding to his rage (probably after the murder of Duncan). In the sleepwalking photos, she is also shown sitting or, more accurately, reclining. Had I not known that these were photos taken of Lady Macbeth, I would certainly have thought that they were photos of...
Ophelia. The stage imagery of femininity—the white colour of her shift, the loose hair, the feminine and less stylized gestures—suggest this.


24. So, according to Valentyna Zabolotna, a theatrical historian and great-grand-daughter of Ambrosii Buchma, who played the Fool in this production. See V. Zabolotna, Aktors'ke mystetstvo Ukrainy (1922-1927) (Kyiv: Institut teatral'noho mystetstva im. K. Karoho, 1992), 53. Also, similar views were voiced in an interview with me in Kyiv on 12 September 1995.

25. The description of the intermedia, and of all of Kurbas's productions described here, is a composite derived from many sources including Hirniak, Spomyny; Zabolotna, Aktors'ke mystetstvo; Iurii Kosach, Dushi liuds'koi charodii (Kyiv: Veselka, 1973), 103; Ivan Kryha, “Samobutni pedahoh.,” in Les' Kurbas: spohady suchasnykiv, ed. Vasyl'Ko, 190-93; Kuziakina, “Ledi Makbet ta inshi”; and her “Makbet Shekspira v postanovkah Lesia Kurbasa” in P'esa i spektakl', ed. A. Z. Iufit (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennyi Institut teatra, muzyky i kinematografii, 1978), 50-66; and Savchenko, “Shekspir dybom,” each of whom recalls or writes about different elements of the production. The fact that both celebrators and detractors mention the final sequence, the crowning scene, is a good indication of its potency.


29. For attacks on Kurbas, see the printed speeches from the Theatrical Discussions of 1927 and 1929 in Les' Kurbas u teatral'nnii dial'nosti, v otsinkakh suchasnykiv, ed. Valerian Revutsky (Baltimore: Smoloskyp, 1989), especially 606. In one of the many defenses of Kurbas, Mykhailo Mohylians'kyi, “Makbet’ u Berezoli,” makes the sensible point that every production, including that of Shakespeare's company, in some way modifies the original play. Mohylians'kyi argues that it is pointless to stand on principle; rather, the attackers should simply respond to the “spring delight” of this “great artistic achievement” (6).


31. Hnat Iura, “Natsionalistychna estetyka Kurbasa,” Za markso-lenins’ku krytyku (Kyiv) 12 (December 1934): 48-61. This vicious attack appeared the same month in which Kurbas was arrested; however, it may have been written by someone else but conveniently attributed to Iura, who had often been unfavourably compared with Kurbas in the 1920s.

32. This is a point many scholars of Slavic drama have made; most recently, Lars Kleberg, Theatre as Action: Soviet Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics, trans. Charles Rougle (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1990), 4.


35. Bennett, Theatre as Problem, 26-27.

36. Kleberg, Theatre as Action, 64.
37. See Bennett, *Theatre as Problem*, 60-83, for a discussion of ceremony. The notion of theatre as a church occurs frequently in the writings of Kurbas.
40. Ibid, 53-54.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Kit Baker (review date 1998)**


*[In the following review of director Henryk Baranowski's Croatian-language production of Macbeth in 1997, Baker highlights the provocative setting and its eerie, preternatural mood.]*

Theater 2000 is one of Croatia's first independent theatre companies, launched in a spirit of rebellion by leading actors yearning to break from the country's officially sanctioned theatre. Founder Vili Matula chose to debut his company with *Macbeth*, a suitably provocative choice—the play is, after all, the story of a bloodthirsty warlord, and local parallels would not be lost on a single audience member. Matula and Branka Trlin, the portrayers of the Macbeths, sold their Zagreb apartment to finance half the production, and the Istrian coastal resort of Pula, a town which shares Theatre 2000's occidental spirit, donated the use of a sprawling nineteenth-century fortress as the outdoor location for the play.

Theater 2000's choice of director was the Polish Henryk Baranowski. The director dressed his actors in Balkan combat fatigues and peppered the action with instances of physical and psychological brutality which are only faintly suggested in Shakespeare's text. Yet this *Macbeth* was not just about the Balkans—the dreamy, nonnaturalistic style of the production probed the psyches of Shakespeare's characters with astonishing precision and depth, making them both individualized and immediately recognizable.

A powerful tone of subconscious mayhem was set from the very start, and continued as the audience was led to the sound of kettle drums from courtyard to rampart, from tree-lined nook to moat. The lights came up on Duncan (the excellent Sreten Mokrovic) dressed in a white naval commander's uniform and puffing on a pipe as an electric guitar screamed Hendrix-like feedback over the speakers. Malcolm (Jasmin Novljakovic), machine gun strapped to his shoulder, performed a weird somnambulistic march as if he were a wind-up toy constantly playing out the end of its motion. Three vamps dressed in gaudy disco clothes and donning cheap wigs cavorted on the iron gate behind as MacDuff (Vojislav Stojkovic-Stole) lurched his way towards this scary bunch along the ramparts above, his head thrown back, his feet shuffling. Until the very end of the play, it seemed that MacDuff's every move was constrained by invisible ropes of evil. Malcolm interrupted his sinister pacing to mock-strangle Duncan from behind as the doomed king continued to puff nonchalantly away. MacDuff finally collapsed center stage and began to deliver his report from the front; the suddenly alert Malcolm leapt forth and held a revolver to the exhausted thane's cranium, fearing treachery. Around five minutes had passed before the first word was spoken. With such strong moments, the fact that the Croatian text might be unintelligible to foreign ears proved a minor problem. Over half of Shakespeare's text had in fact been cut in favor of a constant flow of such stage imagery.

Another particularly potent sequence was set in Macbeth's castle immediately before Duncan's murder. Lady Macbeth (in a magnificent performance by Branka Trlin) emerged from behind a tarpaulin where Duncan, a tyrant with no qualms about exercising his royal prerogative, had just bedded her. After a postcoital wash, she plunged her hands into the water and pulled out two daggers which seemed to have materialized from the seed she had just rinsed off her legs. In an instant, the action shifted as Lady Macbeth leapt on top of a nearby well and began brandishing the knives in slow motion, her dripping legs bathed in a hellish green light filtering up through a grate. The effect was as if the murder weapons had sprung from Lady Macbeth's loins. The only
sound was her breathing, a slow and rhythmic series of gasps. Banquo (Nebojsa Borojevic) then crept onstage with his son Fleance (Goran Borojevic), whistling intently at imagined forest beasts as the unseen Lady Macbeth continued to carve the air behind him. This turned out to be a premonition of the murder of Banquo, which in this interpretation was carried out by none other than Lady Macbeth, Banquo's old flame and mother of Fleance; Lady Macbeth insinuated herself into the murder plot as the unnamed third murderer in order to save her only son. Enter Macbeth for the “Is this a dagger” speech—the weapons he has seen are those held aloft by Lady Macbeth, which he duly takes to murder Duncan. Lady Macbeth has thus knowingly spurred the only emotion that would arouse his passions to the requisite temperature: jealousy.

Baranowski's many bold strokes included making the incorporeal spirit of all characters just as real as their physical presence. Thus characters could instantly become witches or other apparitions—witness Lady Macbeth with her knives. In Macbeth's own words, “Nothing is but what is not.” Baranowski showed what happens if we take Macbeth at his word, and gave us a world where reality and phantasmagoria are on an equal footing. Other notable choices included Ladies Macbeth and MacDuff, Lennox, and a black-cap Duncan incarnated as witches, wallowing in each other's misery with orgiastic pleasure as a huge Croatian flag flapped in the breeze and a cross burned over the city behind them; Macbeth trying to burrow his way head first into the refuge of Lady Macbeth's womb, with then Ross doing the same to Lady Macduff; and the climax, an apocalyptic parody of a Balkan toast in which the blind drunk Malcolm and his lackeys smashed dozens of empty bottles on the ground in honor of his ascendance as the latest warlord.

Perhaps the production's main weakness was precisely that amidst such unrelenting doom there was little or no moral movement, no recognizable loss and regaining of a state of grace. Yet simply experiencing the emotionally rich orchestration of movement, voice, and sound proved strangely cathartic and deeply moving. Those attending were apparently drawn in by this singular vision of Macbeth's inner world—by the end of the week the theatre was packed to the gills, with the local audience intently watching each new atrocity.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Lois Potter (review date 2002)**


>In the following excerpted review of the 2001 Globe season, Potter returns a mixed evaluation of director Tim Carroll's Macbeth, approving of its unconventional setting as a contemporary formal event and its individual performances, while disparaging some of Carroll's directorial additions.>

Tim Carroll's production of Macbeth was described to me as a failure, sometimes an “interesting failure”—so of course I was bound to be pleasantly surprised, and I was. Its basic metaphor seemed to be that of a New Year's or Halloween party, with the entire cast in tuxedos and long dresses. Paul Chahidi, one of the witches, explained in an interview that eveningwear “both provides a neutral palate and immediately suggests night.” I wondered whether it might also be an equivalent to the Jacobean masque: performance plus social event. One of the witches' dances might have been a modern version of the “widdershins” antimasque dance by the witches in Jonson's Masque of Queens. The performance opened with the entire company dancing; Banquo was murdered in a game of blindman's buff; and, before killing Lady Macduff and her son, one of the murderers danced with her while the other pretended to be playing with the boy. The minimal props consisted of items that might have been found in any hotel. The Bloody Sergeant used a napkin to indicate his wounds; he later handed it to Macbeth; Macbeth in turn passed it to his wife as he went upstage, and she came downstage reading it: it had now become the letter telling her about the witches' prophecy. The sound of ripping napkins accompanied the final fight, and feathers—from the pillows on which Macbeth and his wife failed to find rest?—fell or were scattered by the characters during the battle scenes. Apart from this, there was only a platform that was lowered from time to time to create a tableau or a table—as in the grotesque
banquet scene, where the guests, in their party hats, sat behind the table, visible only from the neck up.

Against the party music in the background, the witches (Liza Hayden, Paul Chahidi, and Colin Hurley) chanted some of their lines and sang others; one of them even went briefly into rap during the cauldron scene, and “Cool it with a baboon’s blood” sounded for a moment like “Cool it.” (For some reason, I didn't mind this, whereas I was annoyed at the cheap laugh in the National Theatre’s Winter's Tale when Florizel, having just smoked home-grown pot, commented on Perdita’s “unusual weeds.”) The witches' comedy, and their rapport with the audience (to whom they addressed the theater's now-traditional warning that spectators should turn off their cellphones), made me wonder whether the singing and dancing witches that we usually blame on Middleton or the Restoration might after all have been part of the play's design from the start.

In the middle of all this stylization, Jasper Britton and Eve Best played the Macbeths as a surprisingly credible modern couple. Britton's previous successes at the Globe have been due to his comic gifts and ability to play off an audience: I wouldn't have been surprised if he had asked us to vote on whether or not he was seeing a dagger. He didn't do that, perhaps fortunately, but he did make his lines sound like something a man in a tuxedo might actually say. In this kind of production the terrifying thing about Macbeth is that he is a believable person in an unbelievable world. The same was true of his wife, no battleaxe but someone who depended on her husband for reassurance and who was seen nervously patting her hair before coming forward to greet Duncan. Far from being a steadying influence, she forced him to calm down in order to calm her down (often by holding her hands). She even sought reassurance from the audience, gently holding a spectator's hand as she confessed, “Naught's had, all's spent.” This moment had a touching echo in the sleepwalking scene, which was played on the swaying platform. On “Give me your hand,” she reached out toward an imaginary helper and seemed, for a terrifying moment, about to fall off her perch when she found no one there.

Not all the characters were clearly enough defined to be recognizable in a cast where everyone looked alike and most actors had to double. But some of the performances were surprisingly strong. Patrick Brennan's Banquo was a genuine danger in life and death: he welcomed the recollection of the witches' prophecy and laughed nastily in the cauldron scene where he shows Macbeth that it will be fulfilled. Some of the doubles were also effective. Duncan (Terry McGinity) returned as the Doctor in the sleepwalking scene and did not get the usual laugh on “She speaks”; here it clearly meant “Oh, I see, it's that kind of sleepwalking syndrome.” Macduff (Liam Brennan), apparently the only Scot in Scotland, also played his own son. The witches doubled other roles, including the Captain (or Sergeant) and Seyton. The uncanny effect of people merging and metamorphosing into each other culminated in the apparitions of the cauldron scene, where the person whose lips were moving was usually not the person actually voicing the words. Not all the effects worked as well. The dovetailing of the dialogue in England between Macduff and Malcolm with Macbeth's visit to the witches' den, though it brought out the parallel concerns about who was “fit to govern,” made the scene seem to last forever. By the end, too, the personal and unhistorical treatment of the story left no context in which Malcolm's closing speech could make any sense, even as part of a ritual.

Criticism: Production Reviews: Richard Hornby (review date winter 2002)


[In the following review of a 2001 production of Macbeth directed by Tim Carroll, Hornby maintains that nearly every aspect of the performance—including choreography, set, characterization, and costumes—was an unmitigated disaster.]
The Restored Globe Theatre in London continues to have the best spoken and worst directed Shakespeare company in the world. Artistic Director Mark Rylance’s decision to have a speech expert, or “Master of Verse,” for each production has given us verse speaking that is clear, vigorously rhythmic, and nuanced. Although the actors are mostly unknowns, their speech is poetic in the best sense, never fluty or artificial, but natural, coming from within the characters themselves, as if we were hearing a troupe of native speakers from the Land of Blank Verse. Unfortunately, Rylance's directors (including himself, although he did not direct last summer) are mostly from the Land of Blank Imagination.

My favorite Globe director prior to last summer was Tim Carroll, the only one to bring a sense of ceremony to the productions. The very fact that Shakespeare's plays are written in verse implies a formal style of production, as does the unchanging, elaborately decorated stage of the Globe itself. Besides, most of Shakespeare's plays abound with ceremonies within them—banquets, weddings, funerals, coronations, abdications, trials, hearings, orations, plays duels—or depict events that have a ceremonial quality, like the murder of Desdemona. Most such scenes at the Globe have ended up looking like Piccadilly Circus on a busy afternoon, but Carroll's shows had precision and style. His production of Macbeth last summer, however, was an undiluted disaster. Style had become stylization for its own sake, at the cost of theatricality or even basic comprehensibility.

At the opening, the entire cast, male and female, entered wearing black double-breasted suits, with white shirts and black bow ties. Later, Eve Best as Lady Macbeth switched to a long gray gown, perhaps to give designer Laura Hopkins something to do, but the rest of the actors kept the same outfits on, despite multiple and even cross-gendered roles. (There may have been some other costume shifts late in the show; I could not bear to stay until the end.) Only rare extra bits of clothing, like a gold cummerbund on Duncan, gave you the slightest idea of who was who. The play is of course famous for its clothing imagery, most of which was made to sound ridiculous, as when Banquo described the witches, dressed exactly like himself, as “so wild in their attire.”

The entire cast was onstage most of the time, moving almost constantly in barren choreography. The witches pranced about like rock stars. Duncan and his entourage were perched on a hanging scaffold, like window washers. Actors lined up bentwood chairs across center stage, then played on them dead front, oblivious to one another. As with the costuming, the staging thus expressed nothing, except the overpowering whimsy of the director.

Giles Block, Master of Verse for the entire season of plays, coached the Macbeth actors well, so that all had the immaculate speech typical at the Globe. Jasper Britton as Macbeth, and Eve Best too, sometimes came up with strange phrasing (“He hath honored me … of late / And I have bought … golden opinions …”), plugging in caesuras where none belong, but they were always clear and rhythmic. But all in all, the visual elements of this Macbeth were so stupid and counterproductive that the production would have been better as a radio play.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Bruce Weber (review date 6 December 2002)**


[In the following review of director Yukio Ninagawa's 2002 Japanese-language production of Macbeth, Weber praises the dazzling and elegant qualities of the cast, set, and choreography, but questions the overall depth of Ninagawa's interpretation.]

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the gaudily stylish but undeniably exciting Macbeth being presented as part of the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music is that the director, Yukio Ninagawa, is
67 and the best-known director of classical theater in Japan. For in its overall glam visage as well as in many of its hip particulars, it feels very much like the work of an enfant terrible, someone immersed in contemporary aesthetics and given to youthful excess.

The stage is embraced by enormous, angled walls of paneled mirrors, often hazed over with smoke and focused lighting. (Smoke and mirrors, literally.) Mr. Ninagawa has said of the play, “If there is a last day of youth, this is a story that occurs on that night,” and his Lord and Lady Macbeth are unusually young. They are played by Toshiaki Karasawa and Shinobu Otake, vividly beautiful performers with the chiseled cheekbones and gorgeous, calculatedly unkempt coifs of rising movie stars. Actors periodically roar down the aisles to make their entrances (sometimes followed timidly by late-arriving audience members). Two percussionists punctuate the play with rock’n’ roll bombast.

Geography is topsy-turvy and time is telescoped. With the sound of helicopters and machine guns lathered over a jungle set, the opening tableau recalls the Vietnam War, as if the Scots and the Norwegians were fighting at the Equator, suggestions of time and place that are undercut by the arrival of Duncan (Masafumi Sanoo) and Malcolm (Keita Oishi) on horseback. (Real horses!) And throughout, the sounds of modern war accompany the characters’ shedding blood with swords and daggers.

Mr. Ninagawa's references to Christianity and martyrdom are so grandiose—like the huge cross of light that hovers over Macduff (Makoto Tamura) as he grieves for his murdered family—that it's hard to know if they're meant sincerely or sardonically. The costumes are of such luster as to elicit the overheard comment in the audience: “Shakespeare meets Vogue.” And the set design is of such clean elegance that even the witches' caldron would be fit for a celebrity loft in TriBeCa.

There seems to be a coup de théâtre, or at least some flashy stagecraft treat, waiting around every corner, whether it is the acrobatically choreographed three-against-one battle that results in the murder of valiant Banquo or Macbeth's lament for his dead wife, “Out, out brief candle,” performed beneath an enormous, swaying chandelier its individual flames extinguishing and recombusling as it moves forward and back, forward and back, barely over his head. Early on, you'll find yourself wondering, “How's he going to do the traveling Birnam Wood?”

There's no question of the dazzle here being entertaining. It's the quickest three hours of Shakespeare you'll ever see, even though you won't understand a word unless you speak Japanese. The production, which has two more performances, tonight and tomorrow night, at the academy's Howard Gilman Opera House, does provide English surtitles, but they're almost beside the point. (A rereading of the play beforehand isn't required, but it is recommended.)

Whether you understand the spoken text or not, this is Shakespeare without iambic pentameter or any other familiar poetic rhythm. The Japanese language, with its syllable-plenitude, and Japanese acting, with its fervid, declamatory idiom provides something wholly different, a whole new music. It takes a while to get used to; at Wednesday's opening performance, several audience members exited very early. (A couple of them nearly jostled Lady Macbeth as she entered, reading a letter from her husband, down the center aisle.)

That was their mistake; even without literal meaning, the language manages to illuminate situation and performance. The actors may be partly cast for their looks—the ensemble is full of terrific-looking people—but they're skilled; they do come through in their words.

Mr. Karasawa's Macbeth is a study in fierce self-questioning, a young man, like Hamlet, with an active conscience but with a different brand of immaturity, tragically impetuous rather than tragically immobile. Ms. Otake, a woman with Audrey Hepburn delicacy, is clothed and lighted so beautifully that you can't take your eyes from her, and that attention is rewarded. Her own eyes glow with the mercenary lust at the prospect of
her husband's ascension to the throne, a frightening shallowness that echoes gruesomely when she goes mad with sleepwalker's guilt.

As Banquo, Naomasa Musaka begins as an overly excitable fellow, but by the time of his killing and his ghostly return, he has become a winning emblem of dignity. And Mr. Tamura's Macduff, who doesn't overdo the agony in his grief-stricken reaction to the killing of his wife and children (it's Mr. Ninagawa who overdoes the martyr business with that glowing edifice-size cross), makes a trim, athletic opponent for Macbeth in their mortal confrontation.

This is Mr. Ninagawa's final set piece, and though the fight choreography (by Masahiro Kunii), as it has been throughout the play, is both elegant and vicious, and theatrically fantastical yet sufficiently suggestive of bloody reality, he lets it go on too long. There are several times, in fact, particularly in the second half of the production, that the director slides over the edge of brass and into overblown effect. The scene in which the witches conjure the apparitions that give Macbeth his false sense of security is redolent of “The Wizard of Oz” and unintentionally funny.

Does all this result in revelatory Shakespeare? Well, this is a Macbeth that may have you thinking less about ambition, bloodshed, remorse and retribution than about Hollywood, MTV and the Hammacher Schlemmer catalog. But there is a lot to be said for Mr. Ninagawa's show-offy imagination, which is largely what keeps the audience interested and in suspense.

**Criticism: Themes: King-Kok Cheung (essay date winter 1984)**


*In the following essay, Cheung suggests that Macbeth suffers from Kierkegaardian “dread”—a fear of the indefinite that excites anxiety and a desire for the forbidden.*

Macbeth, in choosing to murder Duncan, exhibits what Kierkegaard would later diagnose as “dread.”1 Though centuries apart, both Shakespeare and Kierkegaard are steeped in the Protestant tradition; and in both, dogma is accommodated in psychology. Kierkegaard, who quotes Shakespeare regularly to illustrate his psychological concepts, has the advantage of coming after the playwright and incorporating his insights. Partly for that reason, interpreting the playwright with the hindsight of Kierkegaard may deepen our understanding of Macbeth's seemingly irrational behavior.

The Concept of Dread seems especially helpful in answering Walter Clyde Curry's question, “By what processes does this essentially noble creature, whose will by nature desire the good or reasonable, come deliberately to choose evil?”2 With few exceptions, answers that have been offered lean heavily on theology or faculty psychology. Such answers may be conducive to a moral judgment of Macbeth, but they do not account adequately for our emotional response toward the hero.

Suspending ethical judgment for the moment, I hope to account for our emotional response by seeing Macbeth's enigmatic choice in the light of Kierkegaard's notion of “dread.” Between possibility and reality lies the dread defined variously by Kierkegaard as “the alarming possibility of being able” (p. 40), as “the abiding state, that out of which sin constantly becomes (comes into being)” (p. 19), and as “a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy” (p. 38). It is the desire to do what one fears, the psychological state which precedes the leap into evil, even though dread “no more explains the qualitative leap than it justifies it ethically” (p. 45). The most succinct definition of dread appears in Kierkegaard's journal:
Dread is an alien power which lays hold of an individual, and yet one cannot tear oneself away, nor has the will to do so; for one fears, but what one fears one desires.\(^{5}\)

Through drama and poetry, Shakespeare has shown what is thought out as a “concept” centuries later.

I

Although Shakespeare does not give it a name, dread informs the atmosphere, imagery, and diction of the opening act of *Macbeth*. As old hags who nevertheless captivate, the witches (the first to appear) seem to embody dread. The ambiguity of sympathetic antipathy and antipathetic sympathy is evoked by their chant: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.”\(^{4}\) Like the stormy atmosphere in which the witches appear, the famous line conjoins opposites. It is both sinister and poetically enchanting, interfusing darkness and light, evil and good.

The three arrange to “meet with Macbeth” (I.i.8), who will be simultaneously repelled and attracted by them. Significantly, it is not a surprise encounter but a meeting that is to take place. Already there is a hint of intercourse between the witches and Macbeth, so that what seems to be an external temptation also can be interpreted, as many critics have done, as a psychological projection. That the words “fair” and “foul” will soon be echoed by Macbeth himself further suggests a liaison between the hero and the witches.

They alarm Macbeth with a possibility—the possibility of sovereignty. Whether or not Macbeth has already entertained this possibility, it is first enunciated for the audience by the witches, who hail him successively as “Thane of Glamis,” “Thane of Cawdor,” and “King hereafter” (I.iii.48-50).

The enunciation startles Macbeth. Banquo asks, “Why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?” (I.iii.51-52). Why indeed? If Macbeth badly wants to be king, as many critics allege, the witches’ words should first fill him with joy, even if the joy were to be contaminated later by the thought of violent means. But he already seems preoccupied more by the foul means than by the fair end. Macbeth is not seeing a crown on his head; instead his hair is bristling. The witches may not have indicated the means to kingship, but in Macbeth’s mind it is immediately tied to crime. And the crime is engrossing. As much as he fears it, he also desires what he fears. In presenting kingship to Macbeth as a forthcoming fact, the witches have made the crown into a nagging possibility, henceforth ever in his mind, not to be relinquished till realized.

The ambiguity of the witches creates an apprehension—a dread which, as Kierkegaard keeps reminding us, does not cause sin but merely entices one with its possibility. On the one hand, the witches cannot be held responsible for Macbeth’s evil decision. (Though greeted by the same weird sisters, Banquo refuses to succumb to their temptation.) But on the other hand, since the witches’ words do come true, their prediction seems as ineluctable as fate; Macbeth seems destined to fulfill their prophecy. “In the Macbeth-witch equation,” as Marvin Rosenberg observes, “Shakespeare has created a dialectic between the extremes of control and free will that plays across the whole spectrum separating them”:

If we recognize the three as simply old crones pretending to be … possessed of magic, then Macbeth is mainly responsible for his acts, and his crimes fall heavily on himself—and on Lady Macbeth. Then the two choose … their fate. At the other extreme, if the Sisters … can determine behavior, Macbeth is a man trapped, helpless to choose good.\(^{5}\)

As does Shakespeare in his presentation of the witches, so Kierkegaard “palters with us” in his concept of dread:

Just as the relation of dread to its object, to something which is nothing … is altogether ambiguous, so will the transition here from innocence to guilt be correspondingly so dialectical that the explanation is and must be psychological. The qualitative leap is outside of
ambiguity, but he who through dread becomes guilty is innocent, for it was not he himself but
dread, an alien power, which laid hold of him, a power he did not love but dreaded—and yet
he is guilty, for he sank in the dread which he loved even while he feared it.

(Dread, p. 39)

In a sense the witches are nothing. They may be construed as “fantastical” (I.iii.53), vanishing “bubbles”
(I.iii.79), arising from rainy fog and guilty imaginings, “Melted as breath into the wind” (I.iii.82). Yet they are
apparitions perceived by both Macbeth and Banquo. In his first meeting with the witches, Macbeth seems both
guilty and innocent; he is at once surprised by sin and bewitched by it. The dreadful meeting epitomizes the
subtle interplay of compulsion and freedom throughout the play.

II

Dread suffuses Macbeth again upon his learning that he has become the Thane of Cawdor. The half of the
witches’ prophecy that has been fulfilled points in his mind to the imminent possibility of the other half:
“Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor: / The greatest is behind” (I.iii.117-18). Since the witches rightly foretell
Macbeth’s promotion to Thane of Cawdor, their prophecy about his kingship may come true as well. But again
instead of relishing the royal prospect Macbeth ruminates on the unsavory means:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good:—
If ill, why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor:
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man,
That function is smother’d in surmise,
And nothing is, but what is not.

(I.iii.130-42)

Macbeth’s visceral description of his reaction to the witches pulsates with dread, experienced at once as an
alien power and an intrinsic propensity. “This supernatural soliciting” suggests that the temptation comes
from outside. But to be efficacious the soliciting requires a willing “client”; it remains something which can
only lure but cannot force. Macbeth has read into the witches’ prophecy an unutterable
“suggestion”—surprising him from without—to which he must “yield.” Likewise “horrid image” is presented
as something outside which wreaks havoc in him “[a]gainst the use of nature” and alien to his nature. But the
“horrid image” merges into his own “horrible imaginings” three lines later. The “thought,” while explicitly
autogenous, “[s]hakes so” the thinker that he becomes paralyzed.

Macbeth’s reaction also evinces dread in the form of “sympathetic antipathy.” On the one hand, he welcomes
the announcement of his promotion as “happy prologues to the swelling act / Of the imperial theme”
(ll.28-29). On the other hand, however, the announcement unmans him, shaking his “single state of man.”
“Cannot be ill; cannot be good” is Macbeth’s way of verbalizing what he experiences inwardly in response to
the soliciting—an admixture of fascination and revulsion. The question “why do I yield” attests to the
irresistible fascination of that appalling “suggestion.” Its “horrid image” unfixes his hair but fixes his gaze, as
is evident from his vivid and prolonged description. He resembles “the individual in dread [who] gazes almost
desirously at guilt and yet fears it,” for “though dread is afraid, yet it maintains a sly intercourse with its
object, cannot look away from it . . . ” (Dread, p. 92). Unnerved by the “suggestion,” Macbeth is at the same
time mesmerized by it.

Kierkegaard distinguishes dread from fear, which for him refers to something definite. The object of dread is
indefinite: “In dread there is the egoistic infinity of possibility, which does not tempt like a definite choice,
but alarms . . . and fascinates with its sweet anxiety” (Dread, p. 55). Shakespeare would have concurred.
Macbeth’s “fears” at this stage are “less than horrible imaginings,” yet so powerful that “function is smother'd
in surmise.” He is immobilized by an imaginative projection, wherein “nothing is, but what is not.” Because
what is taking place in his mind is only a possibility—something not grounded in reality—it “is not.” At
the same time this possibility is so intense that it blots out everything else and becomes all there “is.” The blurring
of possibility and reality suggests the “dizziness” of dread, which occurs when “freedom gazes down into its
own possibility, grasping at finiteness to sustain itself” (Dread, p. 55). Macbeth's flurry portends that the
possibility has become too “real” to be dismissed. Though thoroughly shaken, he is hopelessly riveted to his
imaginings. Or, as Banquo astutely observes, Macbeth is “rapt” (I.iii.143).

III

After Duncan's nomination of Malcolm as successor, however, the nebulous fears of Macbeth crystallize into
guilty “desires”:

Stars, hide your fires!
Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

(I.iv.50-53)

The erstwhile “suggestion,” along with its “horrid image” and “murther yet . . . fantastical,” has in the
meantime developed into a full-blown vision of a violent act which Macbeth must hide from even himself.

With this sharpening focus dread reaches its apex, as is suggested by Macbeth's highly ambivalent diction.
Macbeth bids the eye to wink at the hand, betraying at once his fear at what the hand will do and his wish to
connive at the act when it is done. The fiat “let that be” suggests on the one hand that the possibility of murder
has become so intense that it will occur almost spontaneously, showing the speaker's resolute commitment to
the act and his wish for its instant fulfillment. On the other hand, the fiat suppresses the agent of the fell act,
showing the speaker's aversion to it and his anxiety to dissociate himself from it.

The semantic divisiveness becomes even more pronounced in the next line. The eye vacillates between what it
“fears . . . to see” and what it strains to see, depending on how much emphasis the speaker (or the reader) gives
to the intervening clause—“when it is done”—which furtively transports fears to longings. The eye would
avert itself from the action but would gape at the finished act. Cognizant of the blackness of his desires and
intensely fearful, Macbeth is nevertheless driven to pursue the felonious course to be king.

No mere promise of the crown wins Macbeth to evil, however. Exploring his enigmatic choice in the shadow
of dread, I am trying to show that Macbeth is fascinated by the deed itself, that his dread increases as the
possibility of that deed looms progressively larger. Macbeth seems a captive spectator in the theatre of his
mind, shielding his eyes from the bloody scenes, yet aroused by them.

IV

But how can a treacherous act have such magnetic power? Commenting on the myth of the Fall in Genesis,
Kierkegaard posits how God's prohibition awakens dread in Adam:

The prohibition alarms Adam [induces a state of dread] because the prohibition awakens in him the possibility of freedom … the alarming possibility of being able. … After the word of prohibition follows the word of judgment: “Thou shalt surely die”. … The infinite possibility of being able (awakened by the prohibition) draws closer for the fact that this possibility indicates a possibility as its consequence.

(Dread, pp. 40-41)

As different as Macbeth is from Adam, prohibition and judgment seem to have a similar psychological effect on both. In Genesis both the prohibition and the judgment are announced by God, whereas Macbeth's conscience dictates to him what is forbidden and what will be the punitive consequence. But the results in the two cases are similar: told to abstain, Adam eats the forbidden fruit; dissuading himself from murder, Macbeth makes the fatal decision. His anticipation of “judgment here” (I.vii.8) should deter him from murder, yet imagined as a “consequence” of the murder, the judgment draws the forbidden possibility closer.

The paradox that prohibition incites violation was propounded by the Apostle Paul in Romans (vii), but Kierkegaard makes us feel its psychological manifestation through his notion of dread: “Scripture says that sin takes its opportunity in the command or in the prohibition. Precisely the fact that something is commanded or forbidden becomes the opportunity. … The opportunity is like a middleman, a mediator, merely helpful in the transaction, only causing to be arranged something which, in another sense, already existed, namely as possibility.” He gives a telling example: “If one said to a child that it was a sin to break a leg, what anxiety he would live in, and probably break it more often.”

True to both theology and psychology, Shakespeare fleshes out the paradox by having Macbeth commit the very act he sees insistently as forbidding and damning. Macbeth enumerates the reasons against murdering Duncan:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,  
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,  
Who should against his murtherer shut the door,  
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan  
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been  
So clear in his great office, that his virtues  
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against  
The deep damnation of his taking-off;  
And Pity, like a naked new-born babe,  
Striding the blast, or heaven's Cherubins, hors'd  
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,  
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,  
That tears shall drown the wind.—I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself  
And falls on th'other—

(I.vii.13-28)

The bloody deed yields quickly in Macbeth's mind to the consequent retribution, but the more he dwells on the woeful consequence, which should be his deterrent, the more he seems bound to the act that triggers the consequence. Kierkegaard is illuminating here: “The possibility of freedom announces itself in dread. An admonition may now cause the individual to succumb in dread … and this in spite of the fact that the admonition was of course meant to produce the opposite effect” (Dread, pp. 66-67). An admonition often combats its own intention, for “dread of sin produces sin” (p. 65). Although Kierkegaard's observation by no
means justifies the “qualitative leap” of Macbeth—his decision to murder—the observation casts some light on his decision, which seems rationally perverse but psychologically compelling. Macbeth fosters his murderous intent in the very act of stifling it; dread increases with each warning till it provokes precisely what is being warned against.

V

The lines with which Macbeth begins the soliloquy—“If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly” (I.vii.1-2)—succinctly define his state of apprehension. Present and future dissolve in “If it were done, when 'tis done”; the movement from the subjunctive to the indicative reveals a subconscious desire to reify an importunate possibility, to make it come to pass. The apodosis—“then 'twere well / It were done quickly”—indicates more explicitly than the protasis his impatient longing and his wish to get the possibility over with—to leave dread behind. Being anticipated forward as an act to be performed and backward as an act already done, the imagined act teases Macbeth with instant performance.

The temporal merging of cause and effect is enacted on a figurative level, so that present images are viewed from the perspective of future consequences. Duncan's meek virtues, which Macbeth invokes to hold back his aggression, are blown up as clarion-voiced accusers: the pacifiers become the aggressors; the victim the judge. The bizarre image of an equestrian babe likewise coalesces deterrent and punitive agent, blurring the line between present thought and future imaginings: a “naked newborn babe,” a delicate object of pity and the very symbol of vulnerability, is conceived as riding roughshod over the blast, on a par with the vengeful “Cherubins” who, like the furies, rush blindly to “blow the horrid deed in every eye.” Even “tears,” the passive, impotent manifestation of pity, are transmuted into active, dynamic, tidal power with the incredible ability to “drown the wind.”

The transformation of pitiful images into aggressive ones turns deterrents into stimulants. As his dread mounts, Macbeth becomes increasingly carried away by a fantastic imagination, culminating in a poetic wish-fulfillment whereby the very deed he admonishes himself against is euphemized, rationalized, and symbolized in poetry as “Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself.” Macbeth gives ambition as his overt motive for murder and disclaims ambition as a spur in the same breath. Indeed by now he is too intent on the act to require any spur. Even though he later tells his wife “to proceed no further in this business” (I.vii.31), he himself already has proceeded too far.

VI

Lady Macbeth's role in engineering the regicide has been stressed by many critics. Like the witches, she embodies dread's ambiguity: she is both the abettor and the alter ego of Macbeth. Furthermore, in projecting herself as the ruthless murderer she provides Macbeth with what Kierkegaard calls “the power of example,” which produces the desired effect through dread (Dread, p. 67).

Her first words to Macbeth echo the witches' greeting:

Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor!
Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!
Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant.

(I.v.54-58)

Being a nebulous, luring possibility, dread has its optimum climate in an “ignorant present” and entices one to realize “the future in the instant.” Lady Macbeth foreshortens and intensifies the possibility of murder by
discussing it as an important task at hand and by focusing on its consequence:

This night's great business into my dispatch;
Which shall to all our nights and days to come
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.

(I.v.67-70)

Presenting the murder as the “night's great business,” Lady Macbeth makes the act which is still under consideration seem imminent and pressing. Instead of looking closely at the horror, she looks beyond the horrid act into the power which will result from it. In this aspect she contrasts sharply with her husband, who drowns himself in horrid images and horrible imaginings despite his perfunctory profession of ambition.12

Had Lady Macbeth incited her husband solely by harping on the fair promises of sovereignty, she would not have gone very far. But she does more: she stands as a foul example to Macbeth and challenges his manhood. To bolster what she sees as her husband's flagging courage, she offers to “dispatch” the hellish business herself. And later she drains him of “the milk of human kindness” by figuratively proscribing her own:

... I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.

(I.vii.54-59)

The speech is insidiously erotic. In stressing her dangerous power over the male and totally helpless infant, Lady Macbeth indirectly calls her husband's potency into question. Macbeth asks, following her speech, “If we should fail?” (l. 59). The question betrays fear and desire: fear of failure and desire to perform. The pronoun “we” suggests that Macbeth wishes to identify with and to appropriate his wife's absolute power, her ability to command performance. Playing on his dual anxiety over regicide and over virility, Lady Macbeth replies, “But screw your courage to the sticking-place, / And we'll not fail” (ll. 61-62). Her figure of speech couples readiness to kill with sexual prowess, confusing brutality with masculinity and displacing Macbeth's ethical notion of what “may become a man” (I.vii.46) with erotic anxiety.13

Dread, sexuality, and violence are inextricably fused in Macbeth. Norman Rabkin has called attention to Macbeth's image of himself as personified Murther moving with “Tarquin's ravishing stride” as though the murder of Duncan were an act of lust. Macbeth, Rabkin suggests, is motivated to kill the King (a symbolic father) “by a drive as fundamental and as irrational as that of sex” (p. 107). The analogy goes deeper, for Macbeth's murderous ferocity seems to feed on his sexual anxiety, an anxiety that is hinted at and probably aggravated by his not having any children. Yet he reacts to his wife's infanticidal avowal with stunned admiration—an antipathetic sympathy. Associating infanticide with procreation, he bids her to “Bring forth men-children only! / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males” (I.vii.73-75).

It is curious that a speech designed by Lady Macbeth to provoke murder should give rise to thoughts of patrimony in Macbeth, unless he too has come to equate virility with heartless aggression—males with mails of armor, mettle with steely metal. He is ready to prove his virility by translating his procreative impulse into a destructive one, his fear of female domination into masculine aggression. His destructive passion smacks of erotic self-abandonment: he is driven to perform “the swelling act / Of the imperial theme” (I.iii.127-28).

VII
Provoking effects of lust and dread are linked in the image of the hallucinated dagger. As a phallic symbol it suggests lust, in this case the lust for a perverted consummation; as an external object drawing Macbeth onward, it suggests dread, both as an alien power and as a personal susceptibility. Stained with blood, the dagger of the mind suggests the proleptic force of dread, which entices one with a future vision and presses one with its realization. Even so, Macbeth's real dagger will gravitate toward the imaginary dagger, as though the image of the bloody weapon dictates the bloody act: “Thou marshall'st the way that I was going” (II.i.42).

The line can also be addressed to Lady Macbeth. Faced with her “undaunted” example and overcome by her intoxicating provocations, Macbeth makes the evil leap:

I am settled, and bend up
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.
Away, and mock the time with fairest show:
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.

(I.vii.80-83)

Macbeth's decision to murder, like the psychological process from which the decision issues, is couched in ambivalent terms. Though he is “settled,” his need to “bend up / Each corporal agent” conveys the immense effort required to overcome his mental resistance to an act still too unnerving to be named. His calling it a “terrible feat” sums up his ambivalent attitude: the term connotes attraction and revulsion, terror and grandeur, epitomizing the process by which Macbeth comes to his decision. His mixed reaction of sympathy and antipathy, so inseparable in the process, contrasts sharply with the deliberate dichotomy of “false face” and “false heart” after the decision.

What makes the decision so haunting is its “dreadful” evolution. Dread haunts both Macbeth and his spectators. Under the spell of Shakespeare's poetry, we too are startled by the witches, we too are fascinated by horrid images, we too are amazed by Lady Macbeth. While the scene of infanticide etched by her is inhuman and morally revolting, its graphic imagery is captivating. Shocked by the eidetic power of the grisly scene, we may be caught in a shuddering complicity. We are similarly taken by the entire play: appalled by evil, we nonetheless are fastened to its lurid dramatization.

Notes

1. See The Concept of Dread, trans. Walter Lowrie (1944; rpt. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957). Subsequent references to this work will be given in the text. The latest translation by Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson of the same work is entitled The Concept of Anxiety (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980). Since the word “anxiety” connotes an emotion pertaining to something more definable than does the Germanic word angst used by Kierkegaard, I find Lowrie's translation—“dread”—preferable, especially when it is applied to the “unknown fear” in Macbeth. There is, however, no equivalent in English for angst as Kierkegaard uses it, which denotes a conjunction of fear and longing, unless one adopts the convoluted expression “a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy.”
6. Macbeth's soliloquy resembles that of Brutus in the orchard before he kills Caesar (II.i.34). Both speakers are simultaneously attracted and repelled by the thought of murder, both are haunted by a dreadful possibility; both talk of insurrection in their mental states, and both confuse possibility with actuality.
7. Norman Rabkin explains Macbeth’s transition from inarticulate fear to explicit resolve in terms of sibling rivalry. The murder of Duncan, Rabkin suggests, is a form of parricide; see Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 105-8.
12. This difference between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is noted by Rabkin; see Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning, p. 102.

Criticism: Themes: William O. Scott (essay date summer 1986)


[In the following essay, Scott explores the relationship between self-knowledge and verbal equivocation in Macbeth.]

MALCOLM

For even now

I put myself to thy direction, and

Unspeak mine own detraction, here abjure

The taints and blames I laid upon myself,

For strangers to my nature. I am yet

Unknown to woman, never was forsworn,

Scarcely have coveted what was mine own,
At no time broke my faith, would not betray
The devil to his fellow, and delight
No less in truth than life. My first false speaking
Was this upon myself. …

MACDUFF

Such welcome and unwelcome things at once
‘Tis hard to reconcile.

(Macbeth, IV.iii.121-39)

[G. E. Moore] had a kind of exquisite purity. I have never but once succeeded in making him tell a lie, and that was by a subterfuge. “Moore,” I said, “do you always speak the truth?” “No,” he replied. I believe this to be the only lie he had ever told.

(Bertrand Russell, Autobiography, chap. 3)

The assignment of truth to one's statements about one's own truthfulness or falsity is a perilous business. Despite Russell's playful assertion, neither a yes or a no from Moore—assuming his perfect probity at all other times, and applying his present answer to itself as one instance—can be strictly false. In contrast Malcolm, who has disparaged his potential as king ostensibly as a test of Macduff's loyalty, has a hard time extricating himself from the admission of falsehood, which (especially in suspicious times) seems as unkingly as the actual content of the lies themselves. Believed or not, Malcolm's self-chastisement must weaken his position, both personally and in general. Wilbur Sanders says that “The very act of envisaging the corruption of his own nature has tainted him. …”1 Steven Mullaney writes that “For Macduff the experience is a discomposing one, for it reveals a family resemblance between authority and its other where no relation was expected,” and he reminds us that at some early time Macbeth too might have truly vouched for his own honor in much the way that Malcolm does.2

Indeed the problems of these self-descriptions become all the more intriguing if we consider that Macbeth meditates self-detractions to himself through soliloquy before verifying them in action by Duncan's murder, though we may well take his word for it that they are already true in thought. In this case does soliloquy then become something like self-fulfilling prophecy?

Malcolm's difficulty in freeing himself from falsehood must sound painfully like the experience of many in Shakespeare's troubled age. There are ample patterns in religious events of the day for extreme reversals of sworn views—and their holders may be less able than Malcolm to come out honorably. Samuel Harsnet, whose Declaration of egregious Popish Impostures left its mark on King Lear, prints the deposition of Anthony Tyrrell, a priest who took part in exorcisms, then recanted and gave information regarding the practice to the Lord Treasurer, later returned to Catholicism, and afterward renewed his testimony in the deposition. In his second Catholic phase the priests urged him to reaffirm the truth of the exorcisms he had denounced to the government. After the fact he explained that he “did willingly yeeld, nothing doubting but that, if God should once againe so draw his grace from mee, as that I should become to be as then I was (that is, wholly addicted to popery, as I trust in his mercy hee will never doe) I should be as ready againe to deny all that now I haue affirmed vpon my oath, as I was before.”3 Even now, engaged under oath and studied in self-denunciation, he gives little promise of stable truth.

Moreover, the Jesuits had a prime reputation as liars because of their doctrine of equivocation, alluded to in Macbeth, which allowed a Catholic pressed under oath to evade hard questions about the activities of priests
and other specified topics by answering in a sense hidden from and contrary to the meaning of the questioner. The ex-priest Thomas Bell writes “that the Jesuits are notorious liars, and that their owne fellowes can not tell when to trust them,” and the anti-Jesuit priest Christopher Bagshaw that “they are commonly held now adayes great liars; and it is come to that passe, that though they sweare, men will not beleue them.”

William Clarke asserts that “the Jesuits ordinary practise in equiuocating, when they haue beene examined; is so manifest, and notorious, as in very deede every ordinary officer vnder her Maiestie, hauing been acquainted with examining of them, are so well acquainted therewith, as ordinarily they will vrge them therewith; yea and commonly say, that they know not when to giue credite to theyr aunswers, making all the exceptions of such equiuocating they can. …” There is a reasoned basis in Jesuit doctrine to prompt such doubt: Henry Garnet, whose manuscript *Treatise of Equivocation* codified the practice for English Jesuits, argued that a Catholic under oath could “admitte the oath with this intention, that he will answere directly and trewelye (and if so they vrge hym), without all equivocation, so farre as he is assured, without all doubte or scruple, that he may or is bounde. And if they make hym sweare that he hath no private intention, or secret meaning, lett hym sweare it also with that very same secrett understandinge, that he hath no such meaning to tell them.”

Thus, complains Thomas Morton, “this is the mouth of Satan, to sweare by an aequiuocation We do not aequiuocate; and vrged againe to sweare this without aequiuocation, to sweare aequiuocatingly we doe not aequiuocate, &c. Heere is contention without end, by this aequiuocation which is as bottomlesse as the pit of hell.” These severe comments reveal a problem the witnesses share with Malcolm: once the possibility of falsehood or of hidden or oblique meanings is broached, it becomes difficult to return to straightforward utterance (assuming there is such a thing) because that utterance will be subjected to the same suspicious interpretation as all the others.

The suggestion of falsehood or obliquity need not be explicit. Writing of situations where hidden meaning is implied by “particles” (i.e., particular details or qualifying circumstances), Garnet asserts that “the judge, if he be wise, hath cause alwayes to vnderstand these particles; for so the circumstance of place, tyme, and person do iustely afforde …” (p. 18). There is thus a tacit convention of interpreting speech by its author's circumstances, which imply an indirectness (however undefined the resultant meaning might be) that operates without a need for overt signals.

These examples clarify some problems of self-description in *Macbeth*. The equivocal oaths not to equivocate, and Malcolm's difficulty in persuading Macduff that he is not lying now in saying that he was lying about himself a few moments ago, show the emptiness of self-referential professions of truth: a statement such as “This very sentence is true,” with nothing but itself to support it, does not stand. And if meanings may implicitly be tailored to the situation of the speaker and, like Macduff with Malcolm, we are heavily reliant on the speaker's own self-descriptions (again, words supported by words), both the nature and the veracity of what is being asserted must be seriously qualified. Not far removed from the purportedly self-verifying example just given is the philosophers' model for a self-referential, self-undermining statement, the liar paradox, “This very sentence is false”; as the obverse of the previous example it reflects back on itself to seem false if true, and true if false. There is good reason to think that Shakespeare knew this paradox from Thomas Wilson’s *The Rule of Reason* (1553 or later edition). He certainly knew a great deal of the controversy about equivocation, and his interest in the problematics of oaths and of known but tacit lying appears in Sonnet 138: “When my love swears that she is made of truth / I do believe her, though I know she lies. …” In the language, logic, and polemic of his time, Shakespeare had (for what it is worth) a rich storehouse of unsupported and easily undermined oaths, and self-referring and self-canceling speech.

There is of course much that is worthy of question about the witches' triple salutation of Macbeth as Glamis, Cawdor, and king-to-be; the words are both dubious in their origin and only too easy and fearful in their validation. What first impresses Banquo, who is for the moment a disinterested interpreter, is that the greetings “sound so fair,” though his later questions, “have we eaten on the insane root / That takes the reason prisoner?” and “What, can the devil speak true?” betray a suspicion of the source (I.iii.52, 84-85, 107). Macbeth, though, is at once narrower in his scrutiny of truth: he thinks the Thane of Cawdor still alive, though
we know otherwise and he soon will too. He hopes (as it seems) for falsehood in this message about Cawdor because of the way he takes the other one, which is clearly phrased as prophecy: he must fear that in foretelling kingship the sisters know his “thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical” (l. 139), and may even have the power to bring it about. When the title of Cawdor becomes a reality, even the traditional association of truth with good cannot assuage his worry that secret evil may also come true:

This supernatural soliciting

Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.

(I.iii.130-38)

Not far beneath the surface is concern about his own possible role even if events are controlled by other forces. Both “soliciting” and “suggestion,” besides their other meanings, carry some overtones of temptation. As his fears grow into horrible imaginings, those imaginings themselves are to be feared: are the witches working on him by self-fulfilling prophecy, and must it therefore come true (verify itself in an etymological sense) merely because it is said? If the prediction is fated to be true, the best he can hope is for a guiltless passivity: “If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir” (I.iii.143-44). And if imaginings have so taken over his whole being that “nothing is / But what is not” (I.iii.141-42), the question is whether “what is not” is (though still within his own mind) in some way that will require that it be outwardly in his own conscious and willed action.

Strange too is the prospect that a horror can be a temptation. It becomes a more active temptation because it seems destined to be true. Yet so quickly and fully is Macbeth entered in, later obstacles do not lessen the allure. On hearing Duncan proclaim Malcolm Prince of Cumberland, he seeks to deceive not only heaven but himself: “Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires. / The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see” (I.iv.50-53). The passive voice tries to make the nameless act of the hand as impersonal as a deed fated by prophecy, even though Macbeth is now consciously considering action. His overt statement suggests positive effort to equivocate with himself: the tongue also (in an unavoidably mixed metaphor) conspires to wink at the hand. Reasoning about equivocation approaches the problematics of this kind of soliloquy or aside in this argument of Garnet as paraphrased by Morton: “Thus, If I were alone and should talke with my selfe, and say one thing, understanding a thing different from that, this is not a lie” (p. 68; cp. Garnet, p. 15). Morton's reply not only denies implicitly the dramatic conventions but dismisses the kind of conscious self-deceit declared by Sonnet 138 and indeed any verbalized self-consciousness: “the vse of speech was not ordained for a looking glasse, whereby a man might see himselfe, but as the Interpreter of the mind, whereby he might be knowen of others. … And can any by any wilfull lie deceiue his owne selfe, as thereby be made ignorant of his owne meaning? This were to distract a man from himselfe.” Yet not only does Macbeth seek to describe such distraction, he tries to induce it. Macbeth wants consciously to deceive himself; and if such a wish cannot be articulated without an artificial dramatic convention, cannot even be expressed without undermining itself and thereby rending the self, we see all the more the extremity of his situation.

It is true that Macbeth's great meditation on the consequences of murder seems to cultivate rather than suppress self-knowledge; but his manner of cultivation has its own subtle, perhaps necessary, forms of evasion if not suppression:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If th' assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success, that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all—here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgment here, that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague th' inventor. This even-handed justice
Commends th' ingredience of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips. He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th' other—

(I.vii.1-28)

One eventual outcome of the murder he contemplates here is the dramatically ironic one that Macbeth is in fact deposed and killed; and the interesting implication is that, as he predicts he will, Macbeth himself does teach these bloody instructions to, of all people, the fleeing Macduff and the pallid Malcolm. Indeed, these are perhaps the hardest kinds of bloody instructions to reckon with: not that others, seeing the success of Macbeth's ambition, will try to emulate him (as in the dramas about the Wars of the Roses), but that he will face, and be responsible for the actions of, forces claiming just revenge and supported by pity. Fully to imagine the crime with its attendant breach of trust is to see how its success becomes its failure; but Macbeth might well not envision pity thus without the actual intent of a murder that will rouse it. As Colin Manlove says, “In the very act of envisaging so fully the ghastliness of the deed to others, he has imagined himself as having done it.”

So, more than ever before, his fears become imaginings, and even beget new imaginings of ruinous consequences. But if, to compare Freud, some unconscious impulses can become conscious only on condition of their being denied (a denial which for Freud actually reinforces their validity), Macbeth brings to mind his impulses perhaps also on the equivocal condition of their being denounced and shown futile, again without invalidating them. Knowledge of futility is in another way not a deterrent for him: he knew all along the prophecy about Banquo's heirs, but only takes it to heart once he becomes king.) Peter Ure speaks of Macbeth as being a parody of an artistic creator; his masterwork may be forbidden fruit and the not-sufficiently daunting results of eating it, and the impact may be a mingling of allure and terror. To return to the liar paradox, what he says may ironically undermine itself precisely by being an instance of itself, and his words turn back on him from the fact and the circumstances of their use. Not only is he reminding himself that others will learn bloodshed from him, he is, as a person weighing the thought of murder, in the process of imaginatively teaching himself bloody instructions. His conclusion in the soliloquy proper is not actually a resolve not to do the deed, but an image of his self-destructive (yet not disavowed) motivation. Though consciously he seems to accumulate reasons not to act and declares them to his wife, he must know well from their brief reunion that she will overpower his qualms; he may unwittingly rely on her to do so. Indeed not
only is he not finally dissuaded from bloodshed against Duncan by his misgivings, he even goes on self-taught to other bloody instructions: the guards, Banquo, Macduff's family. With results equivocally subversive of their supposed purpose, Macbeth's thoughts actually inure him to the spilling of blood. The witches do after all have their way through the workings of his mind, though he beguiles himself with a fully intended resistance.

This whole process by which Macbeth is drawn in is epitomized by his vision of the dagger:

Is this a dagger which I see before me,  
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.  
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.  
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible  
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but  
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?  
I see thee yet, in form as palpable  
As this which now I draw.  
[Draws dagger.]

Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going,  
And such an instrument I was to use.  
Mine eyes are made the fools o' th' other senses,  
Or else worth all the rest. I see thee still,  
And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,  
Which was not so before. There's no such thing.  
It is the bloody business which informs  
Thus to mine eyes. ...

(II.i.34-50, 57-61)

The apt words of R. A. Foakes about this apparition can be turned back upon Macbeth's recent past:

At first symbolising his terror and desire to do the deed, it then becomes an emblem of the deed achieved, and as the vision fades. Macbeth's soliloquy ends with a series of images willing his identification with the powers of darkness, even as they register the 'present horror' of the moment. The lines suggest a link with the Weird Sisters, in their reference to witchcraft and to Hecate, and mark Macbeth's awareness that he is aligning himself with evil; but his full sense of the terrible nature of the murder he is about to do also makes the overcoming of his own scruples, of the horror he feels, of all the large part of himself that rebels against it, so much the greater challenge.14

The dagger seems to him as palpable as the witches' prophecies which have begun to come true. Foakes says of the next development, the allusion to the eyes and the other senses (ll. 45-46), that his eyes "show through this illusion what is compelling him from within"; the vision with its attendant self-knowledge wakes in him the action itself, here foreshadowed as he draws his own dagger. Then the blood standing on the airy vision reminds him again, as the encounter with the witches first had, of the murderous thoughts which are truly his own yet (he would like to think) seem somehow put upon him as if by unknown forces. But whatever incitement that blood, and the horror of the night, may be, he tries to deny the reality of the bloody vision and hide himself from his guilty surroundings. His imaginings impel him onward, yet he must refuse their actuality as they lead him.
In his struggle to undo himself while yet hiding knowledge of that action from himself, Macbeth relies, perhaps unconsciously, on his wife's unrestrained will and open acknowledgment of its force. Manlove says of Macbeth's matter-of-fact announcement to her of Duncan's plan to arrive and then leave “Tomorrow, as he purposes” (I.v.60), “He can pretend that everything he says of Duncan's visit is perfectly natural, can seek to divide himself from his evil purpose so that his wife will be his prompter” (p. 139) and will, for instance, exclaim, “O, never / Shall sun that morrow see!” She readily enacts and gives power to the impulses he feels obliged to resist, even if she must as a rationale unconsciously falsify his nature: he is by her standards too full of the milk of human kindness. Thus, as she ministers to his need for self-deceit, she forms an image of him that allows her the roles she herself craves of not only king-maker but devil-maker. This couple, whose relationship many critics have found highly charged sexually, unconsciously carry out variant hypothetical senses of the ending of Sonnet 138: “Therefore I lie with her, and she with me, / And in our faults by lies we flattered be.”

The role Lady Macbeth chooses puts her effectively in rivalry with the weird sisters: as she reads of their message, which confirms for her too the reality of “fate and metaphysical aid,” she charges the absent Macbeth to “Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear” (I.v.25-26), a contrast not only between her spirits and Macbeth's, but between hers and the witches' in power over his ear. But she becomes adequate to the mission only by her dread prayer:

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full  
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood;  
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
Th' effect and it! …

(I.v.40-47)

Whether or not this happens, a terrible price is somehow exacted, as in the Sleepwalking Scene. But she gains her object, to outdo the witches by overwhelming Macbeth's last resistance to the tempting images they have stirred in him. Throughout, there are unknowing complicities of falsehood and flattery (some of it self-flattery) by husband and wife even in their frankly acknowledged commitments to evil. Thus it is that once again open warnings subvert or invert themselves and become incitements.

As he learns to do the deed that fills his imagination, Macbeth tries also to practice his wife's counsel to “Look like th' innocent flower, / But be the serpent under 't” (I.v.65-66). He hardly seems a success at it; the result is best described by Lady Macbeth's comment on the plan to accuse the grooms of Duncan's death, “Who dares receive it other?” (I.vii.78). In the two rumor scenes—II.iv and III.vi—Macduff and Lennox clothe their criticisms of Macbeth in irony (Lennox only partly, Macduff so fully that scarcely anything but his intention of going home instead of to the investiture gives him away). Irony, a circumspect figure of rhetoric that is still much used in politically repressive situations, gives the lie by convention to the surface meaning of what is said; it might be considered an implicit variant on the liar paradox, though it is only as fully unsettling as that paradox when it is (in Wayne Booth's terms) unstable and infinite. Here it discreetly unmasks actions that were themselves, as suggested by Lady Macbeth's rhetorical question, by no means totally hidden. The counterpart in deeds of the liar paradox is well described by these words of Brian Vickers on the events of the play: “once it has gained its desires, evil can afford to declare itself. Yet in Macbeth's case that declaration was not voluntary, or the result of carelessness. His guilt has been exposed by his own actions.” For whatever reasons—conscious or unconscious, voluntary or involuntary—supposedly hidden actions can disclose themselves and to that extent function like liar paradoxes, challenging the beholder in turn to enter into a “knowing” self-deception. As he acknowledges more openly to himself his commitment to evil and ceases to need his wife as a counterweight to his conscience, Macbeth takes the initiative in deeds and hides them from her, though by the time of the raid on Macduff's castle he is quite open in his intimidation of all the
thanes. All these developments figure in his conclusion (which he does divulge in general terms to his wife) that “I am in blood / Stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er” (III.iv.137-39). He has achieved, though at other great costs, release from doubts about his nature (so that secrecy from his wife is a kind of openness with himself) and about his ability to act out evil, and also release from the need for hypocrisy. His full commitment to evil makes for a new honesty with himself and implicitly the nation, though it is a self-undermining honesty.

Another of Macbeth's honesties consists in speaking lies which by his own actions, even the very words themselves, come true. Though there is a sort of honesty in the outcome, the starting point is outrageous hypocrisy with no intention of truth. There is thus a particular force in Macbeth's extravagant lament for Duncan:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had liv'd a blessed time; for, from this instant,
There's nothing serious in mortality;
All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead;
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of.

(II.iii.92-97)

Among several critics who have recognized senses in which these words come true, perhaps the best commentator is Wilbur Sanders:

… by making Macbeth spokesman for this insight, Shakespeare imparts a peculiar twist to the sense—Renown and Grace is dead. Though it is Macbeth's self-accusation that speaks, recognising how he has uncreated something which it is not within his powers to recall to life either in Duncan or in himself, nevertheless he has performed the murder of Renown and Grace for his world, as well as for himself. For the world of the play, too, these things are dead.

(pp. 257-58)

Macbeth has indeed performed through these words (and thus made them an instance of what they announce) the same murder of virtues that he has in another sense enacted physically. His hyperbole—a figure that Puttenham calls “the loud lyer” must be heard by the thanes, whatever their suspicions, in the spirit of “Who dares receive it other?” Thus his rhetoric ensures that all court rhetoric hereafter will ring false, though its hearers or speakers may guess or even know the truth. And there is still more performative force to his words about Banquo. Even while trying to spy out his travel plans to plot his death, Macbeth charges Banquo not to miss the banquet (III.i.27). Then, when he knows Banquo lies in a ditch, he tells the company he wishes “the grac’d person of our Banquo present, / Who may I rather challenge for unkindness / Than pity for mischief” (III.iv.41-43). Though he is horrified when the spirit of Banquo responds to this reproach and invitation, he renews it with a toast and again sees the apparition, which this time also leaves at his bidding. The point is not only that murder will out, although that is the theme of most of his asides here; the guilt really becomes public only to the extent that Macbeth himself behaves strangely. In his compulsive repetition, Macbeth seems actually to be testing and fearing the power of his own words, as he had first shaken at the witches' imposing speech. So it is not surprising that he should now seek out the witches and desperately trust “to know, / By the worst means, the worst…” (III.iv.135-36). Having found against his will what seems a supernatural power to make evil come true by lying, he must trace this power to its apparent source and know the full range of that evil.
Macbeth’s suspicions of the witches whom he has determined to consult again should have been an important context for his understanding of their messages, since, as Garnet argues, the circumstances of the speaker are a sufficient clue to the presence of equivocation. Macbeth had first believed the witches not because he wanted to (at least, one side of him) but because their prophecies began to come true in quite a literal sense and because they seemed to have access to the frightening secrets of his heart. Now he so craves foreknowledge, still of a literal sort, that he suppresses his doubts and better judgment. Though he had once been honest with himself about the consequences of evil while self-deceiving about his motives for thinking of them, he now is fully aware of his purposes but unwilling to give the foretelling of consequences a proper scrutiny.

The question of literalism is relevant because the issue is one of interpretive conventions (including the role of figurative meaning): the debates about equivocation, on their more intellectual level, rehearsed the canons of scriptural interpretation, which stood in those days for a semiotics. The Jesuit account of equivocation as a method of scriptural exegesis relied in a major way, as explained by Frank L. Huntley, on the concept of mixed propositions, part spoken and another part only thought or held as a mental reservation; the unspoken portion gave a new turn to the meaning. Mental reservation was claimed to be necessary to explain many scriptural passages as being not lies if rightly understood; the foremost Jesuit partisan, Robert Parsons, argued, for instance, among many examples, that John the Baptist's negative answer to the question “Are you a Prophet?” (John 1:21, translated differently in the King James version) was a model for priests to deny their office when unlawfully asked. Mixed propositions might also have a visual component: Huntley mentions an anecdote that St. Francis of Assisi helped a poor man escape his pursuers by looking the wrong direction while saying “He went that way,” but pointing the true way inside his sleeve: and Parsons invents a facetious instance that his opponent Thomas Morton might receive a bequest when a dying man says “I giue and bequeath vnto Thomas Morton,” then (his voice failing) writes “a thousand” and points to a gold angel.

Morton’s counterclaim is that the problematic scriptural passages can be interpreted figuratively through multiple verbal meanings rather than addition of understood phrases or clauses; thus John is not a prophet in the senses meant by the questioners but in another sense. He considers that the equivocations in Parson’s examples “are not properly Mental, but Verball, because the meanings which he calleth Reservations, were implied in the words of those sentences, and in the circumstances thereof” and he generalizes that “there is no speech in Scripture, whether it be proper or figurative, but it accordeth vnto the vse of the outward words and the meaning may possibly be apprehended by an intelligent Reader, who can justly obserue the phrase of speech, and the due circumstances thereof” (pp. 157, 129). The principle of latent double meaning to which Morton appeals is amphibology; it is a major concept for Parsons too, but he considers it only one form of equivocation, and he emphasizes that use of different meanings by different persons in scriptural examples creates misunderstanding among those persons. A basic assumption by Morton is revealed by this quotation he gives on the ethics of equivocation from Azorius, a Catholic casuist whom he frequently cites: “If the words we vse are not according to their common signification among men, ambiguous or doubtfull, and haue only one sense, we ought to vse them in that sense which they haue in themselues … but he doth lie who vnderstandeth his speeches otherwise than they do signifie in themselues.” Most words, it seems, have only a single meaning, which resides in the word itself (though some have more than one, also inherent in the word, and though there is also ambiguity of syntax). There is an obligation to use, and a right to interpret according to, these intrinsic meanings; the trouble with mental reservation is that deviant senses are not signaled.

The problem in interpreting equivocations is thus measured at least partly by the gap between mental reservation as a possible hidden tactic of the speaker or writer and the conventional resources of construing language available as well to hearers and readers, the latter exemplified by amphibology and the circumstances of the speaker or writer. In the scriptural examples the need for an equivocal reading is usually argued from the inadequacy of literal meaning; is evident literal falsity therefore a means of conveying figurative truth? Puttenham emphasizes the duplicity of figures, “because they passe the ordinary limits of common vtrerance, and be occupied of purpose to deceive the eare and also the minde, drawing it from
plainnesse and simplicitie to a certayne doublenesse, whereby our talke is the more guilefull & abusing” (p. 154), and he sets forth the conventions for doing this (thereby reducing whatever “deceit” there might have been). The contradictory self-reference of the liar paradox is not fully present here, since the evident falsehood is literal whereas the truth it supposedly points to is figurative; but the two might come into paradoxical conflict if the equivocation were so thorough as to break down the barrier between figurative and literal.

The specific issue in the play is the nature of the equivocation, and the possibility for decoding it, in the apparitions and their messages given to Macbeth at his urging: the armed head that warns “Beware Macduff,” the bloody child that tells Macbeth to “Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn / The pow'r of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth,” and the crowned child bearing a tree who advises and prophesies “Be lion-mettled, proud, and take no care / Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are. / Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him” (IV.i.71, 79-81, 90-94). In one literal reading the last two of these prophecies describe impossibilities and thus misleadingly give hopeful messages; indeed, as Howard Felperin says, “It is only when we suppress their literal meaning (and our own literalism) and take the prophecies solely at a figurative level that they can be said to ‘come true’ at all. …”28 They are like the trick prophecies in Act I, Scene iv of 2 Henry VI, where Suffolk is warned of death by water (he dies at the hand of Walter Whitmore) and Somerset is advised to shun castles (the Castle Inn at St. Albans being the place of his doom), though we may sense more importance in the present tricks. Yet they are not wholly tricks, for taken literally the words conflict with the companion prophecy about Macduff; there is this much of a verbal signal to interpret them wary. And the mixed propositions of verbal and visual do somewhat more to express the nature of the verbal equivocation: as various critics point out (though it surely takes second-guessing to perceive it) the bloody child hints Macduff's caesarian birth and the crowned child holding the tree suggests the heir to the crown bearing a cut branch. But the spectacle too has its varied tonalities: apart from the blood and the content of the verbal messages, the babes and the tree could have been “life-themes” (G. Wilson Knight), or “the unpredictable future” and “the living green of nature itself” (Cleanth Brooks).29 The very proliferation of conflicting or doubtful messages and symbols should itself hint that there may be traps of interpretation.

The greatest trap of all is precisely in Macbeth's relation to what is told him. As Sanders remarks of all the prophecies in the play, including especially the earlier ones:

The very predictions seem to presuppose the effect they will have upon Macbeth—as if a deterministic net had been cast over the whole action. … The double nature of the prophecies (as merely descriptive and so powerless to effect what they predict, and yet binding upon Macbeth as a kind of Fate) is reflected in his equivocal attitude to them: in so far as he acts, he takes the future on his shoulders and undertakes to create it, thus becoming the accomplice, or even the master, of his fate; yet he persists in regarding the future as pre-ordained and Fate as his master.

(pp. 280-81)

This perception of Macbeth's involvement in the prophecies' completion is powerfully, if indirectly, true in the three predictions borne by the apparitions. Whatever the need to beware Macduff already, Macbeth greatly increases the danger by slaughtering Macduff's family. The spirits actually counsel against this by urging him to scorn the power of man and take no care about conspirers; yet the predictions on which that hopeful advice is based prove equivocal, though again there are warning signs. In any case, though, by a further ironic turn, Macbeth makes false hope and bravado a reason to discard after all the small bit of potentially helpful guidance among much that is deceptive:

Then live, Macduff; what need I fear of thee?
But yet I'll make assurance double sure,
And take a bond of fate. Thou shalt not live,
That I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies,
And sleep in spite of thunder.

(IV.i.82-86)

This resolution of his is redirected in a worse way still when news comes through that Macduff has fled, leaving his family unprotected. Thus Macbeth takes literally what needs to be figurative, fails to measure words by sights, and misplaces both doubt and trust. He mistakes a complex of deceptions, but one that by that same token should not be deceptive that it is deceptive. Though he is merely auditor and spectator of the apparitions, being denied direct intervention by speech, he breaks the plane of their self-contained reality in another way by helping to create his own deceptions and fulfill one prophecy literally by perceiving the literal impossibility of the others. In becoming a part of the self-deluding show and undoing some literalisms to confirm another, he skews the boundaries of literal and figurative and of perceiver and perceived, with paradoxical results.

More paradoxical still is Macbeth's powerful meditation on hearing his wife's death, in words which reflect not only on themselves and the life they describe but on actor and audience:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(V.v.24-28)

Although one impulse we may have is to dissociate ourselves from this view of life and say that life is meaningless to Macbeth only because he has made it so, the words here must bring to a crisis the general question posed by Bernard McElroy: “How can a man who violates his humanity tell us so much about what humanity is?” To this question we may add: “especially when he tells us that life signifies nothing?” The problem is further sharpened in Sanders's quotation from Lascelles Abercrombie as if to foretell the progeny of Saussure: “in the very act of proclaiming that life is 'a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing', personal life announces its virtue, and superbly signifies itself” (Sanders, p. 303). The self-reference bothers Sanders, who wishes to avoid “the guillotine criterion of philosophic respectability, which would make Macbeth's sentiments appear self-condemned in the very utterance”; on the contrary, in the context of the liar paradox (a traditional challenge to philosophic respectability that is not considered by Sanders) letting the contraries battle each other need not really cancel them. It is the poor player acting Macbeth who tells, in words that signify that they signify nothing, of the poor player as a symbol of nothingness; there is then at least a double self-reference, one dimension of which is metadramatic. Thus David Willbern suggests that “Even that most desperate and apparently nihilistic statement of the nothingness of theatrical significance, which Macbeth utters at the end of his play, sounds some positive notes of affirmation: that it is the player, the stage, and the tale that signify, award significance to, exist within and create images for, nothing”; and from an actor's viewpoint (and less positively) Ian McKellen asks his audiences something like “If Macbeth thinks McKellen is wasting his time, what the hell do you think you're doing watching me?” It is right that the audience should be drawn in here: we somehow try to look for meaning not only in these words but in the whole play, and we presumably draw our criteria for meaning in some fashion from the life that is here said to be meaningless. All this would seem to dissolve reality in some more severe way than Puck's epilogue ever could; but Macbeth, the actor, and we all contemplate in some manner the minimal features of our humanity (not least of which is the ability to delimit what we are not in words which create their own limitations by denying themselves). Thus our common enterprise achieves a kind of essentiality through the excluding and self-annulling assertion of nothingness. If Lear achieves “the thing itself” by giving away all in folly and
contemplating nothingness, Macbeth attains that negative vision by a commitment to evil that reduces his life to nothing; and it is such a vision that compels us to join in understanding though we would not or dare not in action. We share with the criminal because we care about (and are) the poor player. When, confronted at once thereafter with the deceptive truth of the prophecies, Macbeth denounces “th’ equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth …” (V.v.43-44), we should recall that it is the function of the player to lie like truth and of the audience to believe what it knows to be equivocation. These thoughts apply though the apparitions in fact declared deceptive impossibilities (rather than apparent truths) and though Macbeth equivocated with himself in rejecting them. We ourselves must cannily credit the nothingness of the very drama that shows us the double vision, of the nothingness itself and of the means by which Macbeth reaches it.

At this distance the confidence of a Malcolm in veracity and of a Thomas Morton in the inherent meanings of words seems superficial. Macbeth “teaches” us far more than the circumstances of his own story would seem to allow—even if that “far more” is itself a sense of limitations shown by means that delimit themselves. Through the many equivocable analogues of the liar paradox—exposures of figurative meaning (be they metaphors, hyperboles, ironies, puns, or other equivocations), portrayals of self-deception (tacit or “open”), displays of acts or words that dare others to perceive their evident falsity, and exhibits of initially false but self-fulfilling prophecies which undermine the self and of lies which performatively become truths—we confront the metadramatic illusions with which the play both forbids and compels us to delude ourselves.

Notes


7. A Full Satisfaction Concerning a Dovble Romish Iniquitie; hainous Rebellion, and more then heathenish Aequiuocation (London, 1606), Part 3, p. 89 (I have deleted a period before the first italics). Morton obviously reacts also to the Gunpowder Plot. Michael Goldman writes thus about these two “iniquities”: “The destruction at one fell swoop of the entire ruling order of England, apparently averted only at the last moment; the readiness of priests of God to swear to a lie on principle—such discoveries must have seemed to many abruptly to open an abyss of evil possibility in the foundations of normal life” (“Language and Action in Macbeth,” in Focus on Macbeth, ed. John Russell Brown [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982], p. 144).


9. Sanders (see fn.1) speaks of “the coincidence, in the Witches, of apparent objectivity with a heart-stopping fidelity to [Macbeth's] inmost consciousness …” (p. 278).

10. An alternative reading of Macbeth's character would find his soliloquies not necessarily reflective of his consciousness, or ambiguous whether they do represent conscious thought. (Nicholas Brooke, “Language most shows a man … ? Language and Speaker in Macbeth,” in Shakespeare's Styles, eds. Philip Edwards, Inga-Stina Ewbank, and G. K. Hunter [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980], pp. 70-71.) If the choice is a matter of personal taste and one's own impression of the play, I should say only that I find conflict in Macbeth's mind both truer to my impression and more interesting in itself. Robin Grove sees in Macbeth “a conscience caught into self-destruction: suddenly and without warning caught into a state of disbelief or self-undoing, where previous certainties are lost and nothing holds as it used to at some sticking-place” (“Multiplying Villainies of Nature,” in Brown, Focus on Macbeth, p. 120.) Slights (p. 111) argues interestingly that recognition of equivocation turns it into paradox—though, like the other critics she cites, she does not deal in particular with the liar paradox in this play.


14. “Images of Death: Ambition in Macbeth,” in Focus on Macbeth, p. 17. Slights considers that in this soliloquy Macbeth retreats from the vivid image of evil to stage villainy (pp. 115-16).


18. Here would be a wry turn to the performative speech acts of J. L. Austin. For self-undoing and self-referential speech acts in relation to the liar paradox, see my article “The Paradox of Timon's Self-Cursing.”

19. Vickers says that “this speech is both self-fulfilling—Macbeth will not enjoy any ‘blessed time’ from this point onwards—and literally true, since ‘grace is dead,’ and Macbeth has killed it (one of its forms is sleep, which he has also murdered)” (p. 60). I think “performative” is more accurate here than “self-fulfilling,” but the close kinship of the two ideas is instructive.

Criticism: Themes: Irena Kaluza (essay date 1990)


[In the following essay, Kaluza summarizes pervasive patterns of hypocrisy, deception, and equivocation in Macbeth.]
Macbeth is a tragedy with a criminal as tragic hero. For such a tragedy to achieve the right tragic effect, the evil must be balanced by other elements. In Macbeth some of the balancing factors are to be found in the very quality of the language of the play. Thus in Acts I and II Macbeth's evil-doing is contrasted with his anguished introspective language, and later, when he becomes a hardened criminal, the horror of his crimes is, paradoxically, both accentuated and alleviated by the magnificence of his language. It is this 'language of compensation' that is generally thought of as the 'language of Macbeth.'

But in point of fact there exists also in this tragedy a more muted language associated with double-dealing, hypocrisy and deception. It is used to camouflage evil. It is often characterized by utter simplicity of form and an ability to communicate different meanings by one and the same utterance, depending on the person of the Hearer and the context of situation. As an example, take the following exchange:

MACB.

Fail not our feast.

BANQUO.

My Lord, I will not.(1)

III i 27-8

Usually it has been Banquo's answer that commanded attention of the commentators (e.g. Bradley 1958:284) because of its later ironic realization when Banquo's Ghost appears at the banquet to terrify Macbeth. But the same 'cataphoric' method of interpretation (i.e. one working backwards by inference from what follows) yields interesting results also when applied to Macbeth's words. At the time of speaking, Macbeth's utterance communicates to Banquo and to the Audience or Readers of the play no more than a repetition of the invitation to the state banquet to be held that night. None of the recipients, within or outside the play, questions Macbeth's sincerity. Only as the play progresses does the Audience/Reader gradually discover the full import of Macbeth's words: they are meant to deceive Banquo and the attending lords and to indemnify Macbeth against a future accusation of instigating Banquo's death. The Reader infers this—when re-reading the text—from the immediately following soliloquy:

MACB.

To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus:

Our fears in Banquo

Stick deep, and in his royalty of nature

Reigns that which would be fear'd ...

III i 47 ff

and from the next movement of the same scene in which Macbeth persuades the Murderers to kill Banquo (III i 73-141).

We may observe, incidentally, that the application of cataphoric interpretation may lead to the discovery of new Hidden Meanings, each time we read Macbeth. Moreover, an accumulation of certain Hidden Meanings may lead to an intuitive recognition of an undercurrent of hypocrisy and double-dealing.
As another instance of the language that camouflages evil may serve any of the frequent euphemisms by
means of which Macbeth and his Lady delude themselves as to the true nature of their thoughts and deeds.
“He is about it” (II ii 4) she says innocently, shunning to name ‘murder’ by its appropriate name. Again the
Audience/Reader must infer what she means from the context, and this time it can be done instantaneously,
without resorting to a cataphoric interpretation.

Finally, the Witches’ prophecies, by means of which these “Instruments of Darkness” deceive the Macbeths,
belong most obviously to the language that camouflages evil. As is generally known, the enigmatic prophecies
in IV i also need context and cataphoric interpretation to unravel the double meanings they carry.

What all these instances of the ‘language of deception’ have in common, i.e. the presence of Hidden Meaning,
and the Intention to Deceive, may also serve to describe one type of a rhetorical device traditionally associated
with Macbeth, that of ‘equivocation’ (cf 2.5). Macbeth has in fact been called a ‘tragedy of equivocation’ (for
instance, by Mahood 1957:130) and this kind of locution appears to characterize the play in some unique way,
just as, according to Doran (1976:32, 154-82), hyperbole—both as a figure and mode of thought—is typical of
Antony and Cleopatra, and paradox and dilemma—of Coriolanus. It is worth remembering that at the time
when Shakespeare wrote Macbeth, equivocation or more precisely ‘Jesuitical equivocation’ was regarded in
England as a damnable instrument of political struggle, connected in the popular mind with treason and
regicide.

Indeed the studies that have been devoted entirely to equivocation in Macbeth are concerned mostly with
historical or topical reference (the heading under which they are discussed by Hunter 1966:2-3), though they
also offer remarks on the linguistic make-up and the role of equivocation in the play. Huntley (1964) deals
precisely with ‘Macbeth and the background of Jesuitical equivocation’, but Rogers (Double Profit in ‘Macbeth’,
1964), for all his interest in topical matters, views the play itself as riddled with equivocations
which create an aura of hypocrisy, duplicity, and double-dealing. His study suggests that equivocation is more
fundamental to the design of Macbeth than has been so far shown.

Beyond doubt, equivocation in Macbeth deserves a comprehensive study that will analyse its linguistic form
and pragmatic function, and its manifestations on other levels of dramatic structure (which, in some measure,
are also controlled by language) such as plot, character, imagery, visual representation, stage business, etc.
Only with the help of such micro-studies can we appraise the macrocosm of the equivocation-oriented total
design of the tragedy with a criminal as hero.

Such matters go well beyond the ‘language of deception’ and it has not been my task to discuss them here.
However, I should like to point out some examples of what may be called ‘extended equivocation’ which,
together with the ‘linguistic equivocation’ underlies the Construction Principle of Macbeth.

The most readily observed is the fact that the Witches' equivocal prophecies meet with the protagonists'
responses that shape the plot.

As instances of equivocal imagery, consider “Pity like a naked new-born babe, / Striding the blast” (I vii 21-2)
and the Birnam wood coming towards Dunsinane (V iv, V v).

Then there are sound and sight equivocations which are non-verbal. As an instance of the former, take the
sound which is a realization of the Stage Direction Knocking within (II ii). It occurs after Duncan had been
murdered and Lady Macbeth has left to carry the daggers back to Duncan's chamber. The SD Knock is then
repeated twice in the same scene at strategic points. It also opens the next scene, II iii (the Porter scene), and is
repeated just before the Porter opens the gate to Macduff and Lenox. From the fact that the sound is repeated
in various contexts it may already be inferred that it carries multivocal or uncertain meaning (cf 2.5). It is only
in II iii 23 that the Audience finds that the Knocking was executed by Macduff and Lenox as an ordinary
means of waking up the household and the porter in accordance with the King's command of last night. In contrast to this ‘realistic’ reading, the characters (and the Audience) who hear the sound of knocking much earlier, in II ii, are conscious mainly of its Hidden Meaning. Macbeth hears this sound, ominous to him, for the first time when he is alone, without the support of his wife. His reaction is one of metaphysical fear, mingled perhaps with suspicion that it is another of his hallucinations, as was the case with the bloody dagger in II i (a visual equivocation, by the way):

MACB.

Whence is that knocking?

How is't with me, when every noise appals me?
What hands are here? Ha! they pluck out mine eyes.
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.

II ii 56-62

Thus the fear aroused by the sound of knocking leads Macbeth again (after the “Macbeth does murther Sleep” speech) to the recognition of the irrevocability of his crime.

In contrast to this, Lady Macbeth's reaction when she hears the Knocking for the first time after returning from Duncan's chamber, is sober, practical and untinged with remorse. She even localizes the place where the sound comes from:

LADY M.

I hear

At the south entry:—retire we to our chamber.

A little water clears us of this deed:

How easy is it then!

II ii 64-7

The third dramatis persona who reacts to the knocking is the drunken Porter who imagines himself to be Porter of Hell Gate and in this capacity interprets the sound he hears to be the sound of sinners' knocking at Hell Gate. But at the same time he goes to open the gate of Macbeth's castle to ordinary earthly human callers. So his own reaction is intrinsically ambivalent.

Finally, let us consider briefly the interpretation the Audience or the Reader of the play may put on the sound of knocking. Similarly to Macbeth himself, the Audience in the theatre are startled by the first sound of knocking, the more so that it comes after a moment of silence when Macbeth is alone on the stage. The Naive Spectator may read it as a signal that the retribution for the Macbeths' evil-doing is at hand. On the other end
of the hidden-meaning scale is De Quincey's famous pronouncement that the knocking marks the re-establishment of life after the crime:

... when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away ... the knocking at the gate is heard; and makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.


A superb example of visual (or situational) equivocation is the stage business of Lady Macbeth sleep-walking in V i. It is based on antithetical contrast which may also characterize an equivocation. In her somnambulic state Lady Macbeth is seen by the Audience as neither properly asleep nor properly awake. She has a burning taper with her, because she is terrified of the dark, but she cannot see the light or any physical object of her environment. She rubs her hands trying to remove the “damned spot” which she sees all the time, but which cannot be seen by others because it is not physically there. Her abnormal condition is apprehended by the Audience mainly from the stage business, but her repetitions of “Yet here's a spot” and “Out, damned spot!” make it easier for them to grasp the hidden import of her equivocal behaviour: the change that has occurred in her since her saying “A little water clears us of this deed” in II ii. The observations made by the Doctor and the Gentlewoman, on the other hand, merely explain verbally what the Audience sees presented on the stage:

DOCT.
A great perturbation in nature, to receive at once the benefit of sleep, and do the effects of watching!

V i 9-10

.....

GENT.
... here she comes ... and, upon my life, fast asleep.

... she has light by her continually; ... DOCT.
You see, her eyes are open.

GENT.
Ay, but their sense are shut.

DOCT.
... Look, how she rubs her hands.

V i 18-26

Such explanations belong to old theatrical tradition. Today one is tempted, while reading the play, to ‘translate’ the stage representation of the type “her eyes are open” but “their sense are shut” into the terms of a cinematic close up, thus placing the equivocal contrast on a strictly visual level.
A measure of proof that *Macbeth* invites thinking in visual equivocations is provided by the stage managers and film directors who introduce visual equivocations of their own, not to be found in the text of the play. As an example I should like to mention Claude d'Ana's film version of Verdi's opera based on *Macbeth* (1987). Verdi's music is not congenial to Shakespeare's tragedy and the following two sequences must have been inspired by Shakespeare's original rather than by the music of the opera. The first sequence shows a closed litter brought to Macbeth's castle. When Macbeth approaches the litter to greet the occupant, only a hand is thrust out for Macbeth to kiss it. The Audience guesses that it is Duncan who in this way has made entrance to Macbeth's castle. The second sequence occurs after Duncan has been murdered and the nobles are leaving the castle. The closed litter appears again in the second sequence and again Macbeth approaches it, in a gesture of leave taking. At this very moment the hand pops out once more from under the curtain. Macbeth and the Audience alike experience a shock: the hand acts as if it were alive. Only on second thoughts is it possible to realize that the lifeless hand was exposed by a sudden swaying movement of the litter. The ‘extended’ equivocation resides in the second sequence and is of antithetical character; but the first, the ‘normal’ sequence is necessary to build the contrast between the living and the lifeless hand. Since this is a director's (and not the author's) equivocation, the Hidden Meaning cannot be externalized with direct help of the text as was the case with the sound of *Knocking within* and the spectacle of *sleep-walking*. In my interpretation the display of the lifeless/living hand demonstrates to Macbeth (and to the Audience) not only the horror but also the futility of his crime.

Finally, let us consider how ‘extended’ equivocation is used in the creating of character. Without joining the voluminous dispute on the protagonist as a *dramatis persona* (summarized, for instance, in Hunter 1966:9), I want only to point out that Macbeth himself is an ‘equivocal character.’ Such a statement can be supported by a careful consideration of Macbeth's idiolect, for instance by contrasting his ‘language of deception’ with his ‘language of compensation’. Another method would consist in contrasting other characters' opinions about him. For instance, in I v Lady Macbeth thinks him to be “too full o' th' milk of human kindness,” while Lenox (in III vi 22) and Macduff (in V vii 14) call him “tyrant.” Both methods, however, would require much space and would take us too far away from our main considerations. I have therefore decided to resort to a shortcut of a literary critic's pronouncement. Robert B. Heilman in his paper ‘The Criminal as Tragic Hero: Dramatic Methods’ (Heilman 1966:12-13) writes:

> The difficulties presented by the character of Macbeth—the criminal as tragic hero—have led some critics to charge Shakespeare with *inconsistency*, others to seek consistency by viewing the initial Macbeth as in some way morally defective, and still others to normalize the hero by viewing the final Macbeth as in some way morally triumphant … [Even] if intemperateness of *eulogy* or *condemnation* is exceptional, the *opposing impulses* are not altogether reconciled … [This] disturbing *sense of discrepancy* [is] not evoked, for instance, by Shakespeare's other tragic heroes.

And in conclusion Heilman complains that

> Shakespeare first chooses a protagonist who in action is *worse* than the other main tragic heroes, and then tends to make him *better* than other tragic heroes. … He … follows, in Macbeth, the movement of what I have called a contracting personality. This is not the best that tragedy can offer.

(pp. 22-3)

I have underlined those of Heilman's phrases which point to what in my terminology amounts to extended equivocation, first in the process of the creation of Macbeth (Shakespeare makes him *worse/better* than other tragic heroes) and then in the process of reception by critics (*eulogy/condemnation, opposing impulses, sense of discrepancy*). Furthermore, my suggestion is that the *discrepancy* in Macbeth's character need no longer be
considered a disadvantage and will become a merit of the play if we look at it from the point of view of the total dramatic design of a tragedy with criminal as hero rather than from the point of view of the individual psychology of a protagonist.

Consider, for instance, the following two tendencies in Shakespeare's presentation of Macbeth, the one opposing the other, and therefore resulting in equivocalness. The first refers to Shakespeare's blackening of Macbeth's character in relation to Holinshed's presentation. When Shakespeare makes Macbeth kill a Duncan who is old, weak, trustful and generous, asleep and defenceless at the time of murder, he changes the facts that he found in Holinshed's *Chronicles of Scotland*.\(^2\) Duncan was in fact a feeble ruler, much younger than Shakespeare's Duncan (of Muir, ed. 1983, reporting Holinshed in *Introduction*, p. xxxvii). But the effect—in dramatic terms—of assassinating such a colourless Duncan would have been 'less terrible, less truly tragic' (Stoll 1963: 187). So, if Shakespeare's alterations do blacken Macbeth's character, their main function is dramatic, not psychological.

The second tendency is to elevate and ennoble Macbeth. This is, executed, among others, through what generations of critics have called ‘a poet that is in Macbeth.’\(^3\) Thus Bradley writes that Macbeth has ‘the imagination of a poet’ (Bradley 1958:295), and Evans calls him ‘the most poetical of [Shakespeare's] characters’ (Evans 1966:160). Of course, from the point of view of the design of the tragedy, Macbeth can be held no more a good poet than Hamlet a poor poet on the account of being “ill at these numbers” as he himself says (Hamlet II ii 119). The poetry spoken by protagonists in *poetic drama* is an element of the whole design of the drama. Macbeth's introspective guilt-ridden poetry is not only a manifestation of his individual human psyche. It is a compensatory dramatic device by means of which Shakespeare makes it possible for a criminal whose character he has intentionally blackened to be a tragic hero of appropriate grandeur. In this way, protagonist and drama are integrated in their dependence on the ‘extended’ equivocation, which they share.

*Notes*

3. ‘This view, thus generally stated, is not original, but I cannot say who first stated it’, Bradley 1958:295, note 1.

*Bibliography*


**Criticism: Themes: Leon Harold Craig (essay date 2001)**


[In the following excerpt, Craig claims that Macbeth is Shakespeare's most metaphysical work, and probes the play's concern with such philosophical issues as the nature of reality, appearance, time, contingency, and being.]

**THE METAPHYSICS OF MACBETH**

Macbeth is the only work in the canon in which the word ‘metaphysical’ occurs. Once one begins to discern some of the play's larger themes, its singular occurrence there cannot be regarded as incidental; neither can the context in which it is introduced and the ideas that are immediately associated with it. Lady Macbeth is musing to herself in response to her lord's report of his strange encounter with those Weyward Sisters, who (he assures her) have “more in them than mortal knowledge.” She wishes him speedily returned so that she may pour her spirits in his ear, and subdue his inner impediments to seizing the crown “which fate and metaphysical aid” so clearly seem to have reserved for him (1.5.26-30). Her wish is no sooner expressed than a servant announces, “our Thane is coming”—indeed, so hard and fast that the messenger bringing this news, “almost dead for breath,” was barely able to outspeed him. When Duncan arrives with his entourage, he too draws our attention to the speed with which this victorious warrior returned to his wife's side: “We cours'd him at the heels, and had a purpose / To be his purveyor: but he rides well; / And his great love, sharp as his spur, hath holp him / To his home before us” (1.6.21-4; cf. 1.7.25). In this respect, the behaviour of the play's eponym is symbolic. For Macbeth is not only the shortest of Shakespeare's tragedies, it is generally acknowledged to be the most fast-paced. And haste suggests that time is of the essence.

The play repeatedly invites its readers to reflect on the basic features of the world in which we find ourselves, including what is distinctive about our own participation in it. It is seasoned from beginning to end with references to nature: to Nature as a whole, to the natures of species and of individuals, to the natural, the unnatural, and—especially fitting, it would seem—to the supernatural (Macbeth's characterizing the witches' greeting to him as “this supernatural soliciting” is one of only two uses of the term in the Shakespearean canon). Of special interest, of course, is the play's portrayal of human nature, as refracted in the natures of the various characters involved. The fact remains, however, one cannot adequately understand human nature (or natures) apart from some understanding of Nature as such. After all, the term, at least in its superficial meaning, is one of distinction: the natural, as distinct not only from the supernatural and the unnatural, but also from the artificial, from the merely conventional, from the accidental and arbitrary. Before one can truly begin to understand Nature, however, one must see it as a problem—one must become aware of what is
questionable about the world of immediate experience, what is ‘strange’ about it (only in The Tempest is this word used more often than in Macbeth). There are several aspects to this problem of comprehending the world, and I believe the play touches on them all. But it suggests that the ultimate metaphysical or cosmological issue concerns how we are to understand the workings of Good and Evil in the natural order of things. And while Macbeth seems primarily focused on Evil, on “the instruments of Darkness,” on “thick night,” on “Night's black agents,” on those “murth'ring ministers [that] wait on Nature's mischief,” it nonetheless shows that the Good is more fundamental, that Evil is unintelligible except in light of the Good, and thus shows why one must see the Good as the ultimate source of everything—not simply of Right and Wrong, and Beauty and Ugliness, but of all Truth and Reality, all Knowledge and Intelligibility, even of Being itself.¹

A tall order, to be sure. And how Shakespeare manages this is perhaps not altogether explicable. It is not difficult, however, to give some indication of the extent to which metaphysical issues pervade the play. Indeed, it begins with tacit reference to three of the most basic. Amid the flashing and clashing of lightning and thunder, “Enter three WITCHES” (as the Folio specifies):²

1ST Witch:

When shall we three meet again?

In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

2ND Witch:

When the hurlyburly's done,

When the battle's lost and won.

3RD Witch:

That will be ere the set of sun.

1ST Witch:

Where the place?

2ND Witch:

Upon the heath.

3RD Witch:

There to meet with ... Macbeth.

When ... When ... When: the question of Time. Where the place: the question of Space. Followed by the answer to an unasked but understood question: Why, for what Purpose: to meet Macbeth (which, as is typical, only gives rise to another ‘why’ question). Time, Space, Purpose. But there is a fourth metaphysical question we might wish to ask such strange-looking creatures were we to meet them on some blasted heath, as do Macbeth and Banquo. It is the very question they ask. First Banquo:

So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th'inhabitants o' th'earth,
And yet are on it? Live you? or are you aught
That man may question?

Then Macbeth: “Speak, if you can:—what are you?” (1.3.39-47). What, indeed! That is, what kind of being are they? Are they material? Moments later they vanish (as if “the earth hath bubbles, as the water has,” according to Banquo; or as Macbeth puts it, “what seem’d corporal, melted as breath into the wind”; 79-82). Are they alive? Are they rational (“aught that man may question,” and they speak in reply, perhaps explaining themselves)? But first and foremost, are they real? If not, why not? If so, how so? In either case, how can one be sure?

The opening scene, then, incorporates reminders of those essential ontological categories in terms of which we attempt to bring intelligible order out the chaotic flux of immediate experience: Time, Space, Purpose, Being. One might in retrospect add Cause as well, for reflecting back on the play, one wonders whether these three weird and wayward Sisters are in fact the cause of anything. As Macbeth later challenges them, “How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags! What is't you do?” Their reply, like so many of their pronouncements, is ambiguous: “A deed without a name” (4.1.48-9). The only substantial information we can glean from their initial manifestation—that there is some sort of war going on—partakes of similar equivocality (“When the battle's lost and won”). So too their chant, which concludes this brief but supercharged opening scene: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair …”—an oblique first reference to the play's (and life's) all-encompassing theme of Good versus Evil.

The second scene, and the first in which appear beings we are sure are human, introduces several more of the metaphysical issues out of which the play is woven: Nature, Fortune, Justice, and Mortality. The first person to speak is the King, presumably recognizable as such by the conventional trappings of his office, and he too begins with a question. With the name ‘Macbeth’ perhaps still reverberating in the fog and filthy air, he asks, “What bloody man is that?” His son Malcolm, recognizing him whom the King is inquiring about to be “a good and hardy soldier” who helped rescue him from captivity, asks the wounded man for “knowledge of the broil.” Whether the battle to which Malcolm refers is the same as that spoken of by the witches is not immediately clear; we soon learn there is more than one. Whatever the case, the gallant captain replies, “Doubtful it stood.” Doubtful! An interesting word with which to begin, given that our philosopher-poet has chosen this character—a bleeding warrior of proven virtue—to be the first to mention either Nature or Fortune, doing so with pejorative overtones in both instances: he refers to “the merciless Macdonwald” upon whom “the multiplying villainies of nature do swarm,” and then speaks of “Fortune, on his damned quarrel smiling, / Show'd like a rebel's whore” (1.2.10-14). It is also into his mouth that Shakespeare has placed the first reference to Justice, more precisely, “justice … with valour arm'd” (29). And there is scarcely a sentence he utters that does not remind us of Mortality.

As for the problem that perhaps more than any other gives rise to metaphysical speculation, namely, the relationship—especially the frequent discrepancy—between Appearance and Reality, this pervasive issue is represented in the play primarily by its most taxing manifestation: in human beings. The problem is introduced, however, in connection with the three creatures whose humanity—indeed, whose very reality—is at issue: those wither’d, wild-attired, choppy-fingered, skinny-lipped, bearded but otherwise womanish beings of whom Banquo asks, “I'th' name of truth, / Are ye fantastical, or that indeed / Which outwardly ye show?” (1.3.52-4). Not that it takes an encounter with witches to start one wondering. Every competent person soon learns that often things are not what they seem. King Duncan finds Macbeth's castle at Inverness a pleasant sight; and the air about it “nimbly and sweetly recommends itself unto [his] gentle senses.” His senses deceive him. Nor is Banquo's evidence that “the heaven's breath smells wooingly here” to be relied upon (1.6.1-10). In fact, on almost any credible philosophic or scientific analysis, our immediate perceptions of reality virtually never correspond to its true character. Thus the innumerable puzzles and mysteries confronting anyone who, like Macbeth, is drawn to ponder the workings of his surrounding world. However, compounding the inherent difficulties with understanding things in general are people's intentional manipulations of appearances, refined to the point of art—several arts, actually, ranging from cosmetics and tailoring to rhetoric and sophistry. We
use ‘clothing’ of all sorts to hide “our naked frailties … that suffer in exposure” (2.3.124-5). It may be old (2.4.38), it may be new (1.7.34), it may be borrowed (1.3.108-9), it may be stolen (5.2.20-2). And as we know, how well one's clothes fit (1.3.145-7), how well they wear (3.1.106; 4.3.23, 33), how well they suit one's time and place (1.3.40; 2.3.131), depend upon a variety of factors, not least of all one's choice of ‘tailors’ (1.7.35-6). But as Macbeth's Porter reminds us, not all tailors go to heaven (2.3.13-15).

Duncan first directs attention to the human problem with his rueful lamenting, “There’s no art to find the mind's construction in the face.” Variations on this theme recur throughout the play. Macbeth, having screwed his courage to the sticking point: “Away, and mock the time with fairest show: / False face must hide what the false heart doth know” (1.7.82-3). Malcolm, conferring with Donalbain in the wake of their father's murder: “To show an unfelt sorrow is an office / Which the false man does easy” (2.3.134-5). Macduff, replying to Malcolm's lecherous pretensions: “you may / Convey your pleasures in a spacious plenty, / And yet seem cold—the time you may so hoodwink: / We have willing dames enough” (4.3.70-3). It may be put to Macbeth's credit, however, that he (like Macduff; 34-7) has neither taste nor talent for dissembling; according to his wife, his face is an open book. A natural warrior, the warrior's code of honour is naturally appealing to him; hence, he prefers direct action and open fighting to treachery (see 1.7.10-16; 5.3.32; 5.5.5-7, 51-2; 5.8.1-3, 27-34). Thus his lady must exhort him, “To beguile the time, look like the time” (1.5.61-3). But he clearly is not comfortable with the necessity of doing so: “Unsafe the while, that we / Must lave our honours in these flattering streams, / And make our faces vizards to our hearts, / Disguising what they are” (3.2.32-5).

With all these explicit references to our penchant for masking inner realities with false seemings, one must be that much more alert to the possibilities of various characters—'good' as well as 'bad'—actually doing so. The play is shot through with duplicity, with double-dealing, but especially with double-meaning, ‘equivocal’ speech (Shakespeare’s use of the various cognates of ‘equivocate’ is almost exclusive to Macbeth). Of course, only because this all-too-human dissembling almost always takes the same direction: vice masking itself with the appearance of virtue (or as Malcolm puts it, “all things foul would wear the brows of grace” 4.3.23), only because people typically endeavour to appear better than they are, not worse, is Malcolm's deceptive testing of Macduff by means of self-slander as effective as it is.

Granted that all the great metaphysical issues figure thematically in the play, there is one, however, that has a special prominence—signalled in the successive iterations of its very first word: ‘When.’ Time is to Macbeth’s philosophical story what Tyranny is to its political, and one of the interpretive challenges of the play is seeing why this should be so. All three of the witches are associated with time, the first with the past (“hail to thee, Thane of Glamis,” a title Macbeth had earlier inherited), the second with the present (“hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor,” a title he has just been granted), the third with the future (“that shalt be king hereafter”—she is the only one of the three that makes predictions; 1.3.48-50; see also 1.1.5; 1.3.67). Thus, it would seem that the Weyward Sisters are, whatever else, unlovely Scottish versions of the three Fates (what Holinshed called in his account, “the goddesses of destinie”). And as they begin the play with the most common question of time, so is Malcolm's concluding speech replete with temporal references: “We shall not spend a large expense of time, / Before we reckon with your several loves … Henceforth be Earls … What's more to do, / Which would be planted newly with the time … by the grace of Grace, / We will perform in measure, time, and place.” Every one of the five acts of Macbeth begins with an explicit allusion to time, as do fully one-half of its original twenty-seven scenes.

Once one makes a point of noticing them, it is remarkable how plentiful—and yet unobtrusive in their context—are the various measures and amounts and locations of time. To cite but one example, the conversation between the Old Man and Rosse begins thus:

OLD Man:

Threescore and ten I can remember well;
Within the volume of which time I have seen

Hours dreadful, and things strange, but this sore night

Hath trifled former knowings.

**ROSSSE:**

Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man's act,

Threatens his bloody stage: by th'clock 'tis day,

And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp.

(2.4.1-7)

Then there are the various queries as to what time it is, such as that of Banquo to his son: “How goes the night, boy?” Fleance: “The moon is down; I have not heard the clock.” Banquo: “And she goes down at twelve.” Fleance: “I take't, 'tis later, Sir” (2.1.1-3). Or Macbeth's to his wife: “What is the night?” Lady Macbeth: “Almost at odds with morning, which is which” (3.4.125-6). And particular characterizations of a given moment in time, such as Macbeth's reaction when the witches disappear after showing him a line of Banquo-fathered kings: “Let this pernicious hour stand aye accursed in the calendar!” (4.1.133-4); and Lady Macbeth's apology for her lord's bizarre behaviour at the banquet, as but “a thing of custom … Only it spoils the pleasure of the time” (3.4.95-7). Add to these the references to Time itself, such as Macbeth's “Come what may, / Time and the hour runs through the roughest day” (1.3.147-8), or his “Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits” (4.1.144), or “these Weyward Sisters saluted me, and referr'd me to the coming on of time” (1.5.8-9); or Banquo's fateful challenge to these same witches: “If you can look into the seeds of time, / And say which grain will grow, and which will not, / Speak then to me” (1.3.58-9). Perhaps not incidentally, then, there are some unusual ‘timepieces’ mentioned: “the owl that shriek'd, the fatal bellman, which gives the stern'est good-night” (2.2.3-4); the bat whose flight announces dusk, and the “shard-born beetle, with his drowsy hums [that ring] Night's yawning peal” (3.2.40-3); “the wolf, whose howl's his watch” (i.e., of “wither'd Murther” 2.1.52-4)—these natural harbingers of night and sleep supplement Nature's more familiar herald of the dawn and wakefulness, the cock (2.3.24).

Almost every character in the play at some point gives special attention to the ‘timing’ of actions. There is Macbeth, musing to himself about regicide: “If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly” (1.7.1-2); and instructing the appointed murderers of Banquo: “Within this hour, at most, / I will advise you where to plant yourselves, / Acquaint you with the perfect spy o'th'time, / The moment on't; for't must be done tonight” (3.1.127-30). Macduff, arriving early in the morning to awaken the King, explains, “He did command me to call timely on him: I have almost slipped the hour” (2.3.45-6). There is Lady Macbeth putting the spurs to her reluctant lord: “Nor time, nor place, / Did then adhere, and yet you would make both: / They have made themselves, and that their fitness now / Does unmake you” (1.7.51-4). And Rosse—himself the master of timing, switching sides at just the right moment—cynically exhorting Macduff: “Now is the time of help” (4.3.186). Having just learned of their father's murder, Malcolm and Donalbain quickly conclude that then is not the time to speak in their own defence, but instead to flee for safety (2.3.118-21). Macduff reports that he “was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd” (5.8.15-16). And certainly not to be overlooked are the witches:

**1ST Witch:**

Thrice the brinded cat hath mew'd.
2ND Witch:

Thrice, and once the hedge-pig whin'd.

3RD Witch:

Harpier cries:—'Tis time, 'tis time.

(4.1.1-3)

One consequence of all these explicit references to the timing of actions should be a heightening of one's own sensitivity to that very thing. As noted earlier, the solutions to some of the more perplexing features of the play are to be found through analysing the temporal sequence of events.7

Several of the most memorable moments and speeches in the play are fairly steeped in the language of time. Consider the chilling conversation between the victorious lord and his lady upon his first arriving home from the wars:

LADY Macb:

Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor!

Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!

Thy letters have transported me beyond

This ignorant present, and I feel now

The future in the instant.

MACBETH:

My dear

Duncan comes here to-night.

LADY Macb:

And when goes hence?

MACBETH:

To-morrow, as he purposes.

LADY Macb:

Shall sun that morrow see!

Your face, my Thane, is as a book, where men

May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue: look like th'innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't. He that's coming
Must be provided for; and you shall put
This night's great business into my dispatch;
Which shall to all our nights and days to come
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.

(1.5.54-70)

Then there is the equally time-conscious conversation of Macbeth with Banquo, who unbeknownst to him is about to set off on his final journey:

MACBETH:
Ride you this afternoon?
BANQUO:
   Aye, my good Lord.
MACBETH:
We should have else desir'd your good advice
(Which still hath been both grave and prosperous)
In this day's council; but we'll take tomorrow.
Is it far you ride?
BANQUO:
   As far, my Lord, as will fill up the time
'Twixt this and supper; go not my horse the better,
I must become a borrower of the night,
For a dark hour, or twain.

....

MACBETH:
   ... But of that to-morrow,
When, therewithal, we shall have cause of State,
Craving us jointly. Hie you to horse: adieu,
Till you return at night. Goes Fleance with you?

BANQUO:

    Ay, my good Lord: our time does call upon's.

MACBETH:

    I wish your horses swift and sure of foot;
And so I do commend you to their backs.

Farewell.—

[Exit Banquo]

Let every man be master of his time
Till seven at night;
To make society the sweeter welcome,
We will keep ourself till supper-time alone:
While then, God be with you.

(3.1.19-44)

What is so noticeable in speeches such as these is but an intensification of the most distinctive linguistic feature of the play as a whole, namely, the density of terms measuring and positioning things in time: then, now, hereafter, forever, never, always, often, morning, noon, night, nightly, presently, ere, anon, already, while, newly, betimes, henceforth, eternally, momentary, sooner, lated, till, until, sometime, after, since, still, yet, yesterday, today, tonight, tomorrow, olden, modern, at once, early, late (etc.). This sample from our plethora of temporal locators and descriptors—and no fewer than four hundred of the words that compose Macbeth refer to time—should remind us of how profoundly, how essentially, ‘temporal’ our very nature is, how ‘unconsciously conscious’ we are about time (if one may be permitted an oxymoron or two). What accounts for this, our pervasive sensitivity to time? It would seem to be due, in part at least, to our awareness of our mortality, to the realization (always present, however dimly) that we live now but will soon die, that judged in cosmic terms our time here is limited to but the wink of an eye—truth so memorably expressed in the most renowned speech of the play, Macbeth’s nihilistic reflection on the ephemerality of human existence, its apparent insignificance in the great expanse of time:

MACBETH:

    ... What is that noise?

SEYTON:

    It is the cry of women, my good Lord.

MACBETH:
I have almost forgot the taste of fears.
The time has been, my senses would have cool'd
To hear a night-shriek; and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse, and stir,
As life were in't. I have supp'd full with horrors:
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
Cannot once start me. Wherefore was that cry?
SEYTON:
The Queen, my Lord, is dead.
MACBETH:
She should have died hereafter:
There would have been a time for such a word.—
To-morrow,

... and to-morrow,

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(5.5.7-28)

Fittingly, proud Macbeth, even though dispirited, chooses to end his life with “sound and fury,” provoked by Macduff’s shrewd threat that, should he yield to capture, he will be made “the show and gaze o’th’time” (5.8.24).
Reflection on the foregoing suggests that, of all the metaphysical questions human beings confront, understanding time—or rather, human existence in time—is especially important, or especially challenging, or both. The other prominent themes of the play are each somehow bound up with time. For example, sleep and wakefulness in accordance with the natural rhythms of time, or of night succeeding day, and of the practical necessity of nightly rest in the natural economy of life (“the season of all natures, sleep” 3.4.140), and thus of what it means to “Sleep no more,” to “murther Sleep”—that is, innocent, secure sleep, the kind that does knit up the ravel’d sleeve of care, and recreate both mind and body—and to instead “sleep in the affliction of terrible dreams that shake [one] nightly,” one’s life becoming a murky Hell (2.2.34-9; 3.2.17-19; 5.1.34). It may be worth noting that the first mention of ‘sleep’ is by the First Witch, boasting of her plan to torment the ronyon’s sailor husband by somehow insuring that for eighty-one weeks he shall “sleep … neither night nor day” (1.3.19-23). Also, the various ‘horticultural’ allusions (and again, the first comes in conjunction with those three haggish Fates: 1.3.58-9; see also 1.4.28-33; 4.3.76-7, 85, 238; 5.2.30; 5.3.23; 5.5.40; 5.9.31) are so many reminders that all natural growth, and decay, takes time.9 Or to put the point more generally, that Being is only physically, perceptibly present—which is to say, naturally manifested—in its governing the perpetual flux of Becoming in space and time—Time itself being the moving image, the “walking shadow,” of Eternity (according to Plato’s Timaeus 37d-e). Even the oft-noted ‘clothing metaphor’10 is tied into time, as when Banquo observes, “New honours come upon him, like our strange garments, cleave not to their mould, but with the aid of use” (1.3.145-7). And Macbeth protests to his wife, “He hath honour’d me of late; and I have bought / Golden opinions from all sorts of people, / Which would be worn now in their newest gloss, / Not cast aside so soon” (1.7.32-5).

The main focus, however, is on the human awareness of time, and the consequences thereof. We all have some appreciation that our present is the result of our past, and that only part of this relevant past is consciously available as memory. Clearly, the particular historical situations in which we are born and nurtured were not of our own choosing or making. How much of our resulting selves, then, can we, should we, must we accept responsibility for? Of the past that produced us, what might we rightfully praise or blame, accept or repudiate, attempt to suppress or to preserve? These are vexing questions, and people differ greatly in how they stand towards these matters. In tacit awareness that the past unalterably closes behind us, that “what's done cannot be undone,” we tend to be future-oriented—to such an extent that as our allotment of earthly days dwindle, we may become increasingly inclined to consider an existence beyond the mortal one.11 It is only in the prime of life, and while dubious of any future life, that one is apt to profess as does Macbeth a willingness to “jump [i.e., ‘risk’] the life to come” in return for some great worldly success (1.7.4-7).12 In any event, the prospects of the future, like the establishments of the past, evoke different sorts of responses in different kinds of people, or even in the same people at different times in their lives. Why this is so, why one individual is confident where another is anxious, seems as much a reflection of a given person's nature, character, and beliefs, as of the objective qualities of his circumstances.

Here, then, would seem to be the primary dimensions of our temporal nature (obvious enough, to be sure): how one stands towards one's past; how one stands towards one's future; and how one stands towards death. It is the resulting dynamic synthesis of these ‘stances’ or attitudes that colours and shapes one's ever-moving point of present experience. Reconciliation with human temporality, and especially with one's own perhaps variable but surely finite existence in time, is mainly a matter of having the right attitude towards the various sectors and features of one's temporal horizon. What is entailed in having it right is elliptically indicated in the Macbeths' getting it all wrong. Dogged by their past, morbidly preoccupied with a future finality as elusive as a rainbow, they are unable to enjoy any moment of the present.13 To understand their mistakes, we need to consider the main alternatives available with respect to each dimension. What does the play suggest these are?

Regarding the Past, Macbeth displays in the extreme what seems to some extent true of many, if not most people: they are more apt to be haunted by their mistakes than gladdened by their successes (rather as Machiavelli suggests they more readily remember grievances than benefactions).14 Even pleasant remembrances can be tinged with the sadness of things no longer being so. Memory might be conceived as
Macbeth’s own “sweet remembrancer” describes it: “the warder of the brain” (1.7.66; 3.4.36). But the extent to which it is subject to purposeful control is difficult to determine, and may well vary from person to person. Macduff defends his evident sorrow upon hearing of the death of his wife and children, “I cannot but remember such things were, / That were most precious to me” (4.3.222-3). When Macbeth asks of the Scottish physician who has been tending his wife, “How does your patient, Doctor?”, he replies, “Not so sick, my Lord, / As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies, / That keep her from her rest.” Whereupon Macbeth orders:

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas’d,  
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,  
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,  
And with some sweet oblivious antidote  
Cleanse the stuff’d bosom of that perilous stuff  
Which weighs upon the heart?

(5.3.37-45)

No doubt sensing the reflexive possibility of Macbeth's query, the tactful doctor replies, “Therein the patient must minister to himself.” Ah, but how? The Porter (“remember the Porter”) might have added forgetfulness to his catalogue of things that “drink … is a great provoker of” (2.3.25-9). The effects of this common “oblivious antidote” are variable, however, and not selective, and only temporary unless pursued to mind-destroying lengths. With respect to past mistakes that one regrets, and wishes “were now undone,” what ministration is there for the chronic mental discomfort they can cause—which, as the the anguish of Lady Macbeth reminds us, can be so severe as to pail one in the dullest smoke of Hell, making death seem preferable to life (5.9.35-7)? The play suggests only two alternatives. The first would be to school one's soul to accept, fully and finally, the reasoning so ironically placed in the mouth of the Queen herself (advice applicable to the entirety of life, not merely to one's own mistakes): “Things without all remedy should be without regard: what's done is done” (3.2.11-12). However, abiding by this policy of ‘reasoned disregard’ presumes a strength of the soul's rational part that is apparently beyond most people. They may have no practical choice but the second alternative: repentance, with the possibility of forgiveness.

Neither disregarding nor repenting are prominent in the play, and least of all by the protagonists most in need of one or the other. Unlike the condemned rebel Cawdor, who according to the report Malcolm passes on:

... very frankly he confess'd his treasons,  
Implor'd your Highness' pardon, and set forth  
A deep repentance. Nothing in his life  
Became him like the leaving it: he died  
As one that had been studied in his death,  
To throw away the dearest thing he ow'd  
As 'twere a careless trifle.

(1.4.5-11)

(He—or Malcolm—sounds downright Sokratic, although one must bear in mind that Cawdor’s “deep repentance” was born in defeat.) Unlike Cawdor, however, Macbeth merely regrets, never repents. The one time he uses the word, he is lying, or at the least does not mean it in the way he wishes it to be taken; he announces his killing of the blood-badg'd grooms by saying, “O! yet I do repent me of my fury, / That I did kill them” (2.3.104-5). As for his forgetting what once filled his mind with scorpions—the memory of his crimes, along with the fear that he will become the just victim of his own “bloody instructions”—he eventually is successful to a point, but at the price of his humanity. With Banquo's shade at last banished (“Hence, horrible shadow! / Unreal mock'ry, hence!” 3.4.105-6), Macbeth vows to become immune to what
he now regards as but guilt-induced delusions: “My strange and self-abuse / Is the initiate fear, that wants hard use: / We are yet but young in deed” (141-3). Having thus committed himself (along with his now passive but worried wife) to becoming habituated—not to bloodshed, which as a seasoned warrior he is inured to from the time we first meet him—but to atrocities, he finally succeeds in turning his milk of human kindness to gall. Apparently she does not quite. As his criminal career approaches its climax, Macbeth can muse, “I have almost forgot the taste of fears” (5.5.9). Apparently Lady Macbeth has not. She never expresses repentance (“the access and passage to remorse” perhaps stopp’d, as she prayed it would be; 1.5.44), hence she never seeks what she needs: the kind of self-reconciliation that could come only from a sense of having been forgiven by someone with the power to forgive. As the doctor who witnesses her “slumbery agitation” puts it, “More needs she the divine than the physician.—/ God, God forgive us all!” (5.1.71-2). Still, it is evident from her somnambululatory torments and eventual death that Lady Macbeth remains essentially human. Whereas the insensitivity and forgetfulness of Macbeth verges upon that of a beast, not a human being—to “dispute it like a man,” one must first “feel it as a man” (4.3.220-1). The only person who expressly repents his sins is also the only one to pray for Macbeth’s forgiveness, albeit on decidedly unChristian terms:

| Cut short all intermission; front to front, |
| Bring thou this fiend of Scotland, and myself; |
| Within my sword's length set him; if he 'scape, |
| Heaven forgive him too! |

(4.3.231-5; cf. 5.7.14-16)

Respecting the Future, the play affirms what common experience would suggest, namely, that the principal factors determining a person's temporal posture are Hope and Fear. A preoccupation with the latter is certainly evident enough. Indeed, there are more mentions of ‘fear’ and its cognates (‘fear’d,’ ‘fearful,’ ‘fearing,’ ‘fears’) in Macbeth than in any other of Shakespeare's creations. However, its action pivots as much if not more on hopes, especially false hopes, we would say, knowledgeable after the fact—“hopes [borne] 'bove wisdom, grace, and fear” (3.5.31)—but our retrospective judgment points to the precise difference at issue: the absolute finality (hence knowability) of the past versus the opacity of a future more or less rich with possibilities for good and evil, the final causes of hope and fear. It is the “royal hope” excited by the witches that inspires Macbeth and his lady to act on their black and deep desires. Only in the final minutes of his life does he realize he has been relying on “juggling fiends” who “keep the word of promise to our ear, / And break it to our hope” (5.8.19-22). Macbeth's own first mention of ‘hope’ comes in a kind of congratulation to Banquo: “Do you not hope your children shall be kings, / When those that gave the Thane of Cawdor to me / Promis'd no less to them?” (1.3.118-20). Banquo does so hope (3.1.5-10), and it is a prospect Macbeth finds increasingly galling with time. Lady Macbeth’s sole reference to hope is in chiding her husband: “Was the hope drunk, / Wherein you dress’d yourself? Hath it slept since? / And wakes it now, to look so green and pale / At what it did so freely?” (1.7.35-8). Her taunting insinuation that he lacks sufficient natural (i.e., sober) courage to act on his—and her—royal hopes has its intended effect. Macduff's hopes in Malcolm are what carry him to England (4.3.24, 114), and Malcolm's hopes in victory carry him back to Scotland (5.4.1-2). It is left to the practical old soldier Siward to remind us that hopes aren't horses, however: “Thoughts speculative their unsure hopes relate, / But certain issues strokes must arbitrate …” (19-20).

Seeing the future as but through a glass darkly, the rational imagination is to the future what the rational memory is to the past. Macbeth's letters have so stimulated the imagination of his lady that she has been “transported … beyond this ignorant present, and … feel[s] now the future in the instant” (1.5.56-8). She has high hopes. Macbeth, too, speaks of the non-existent, merely imagined future as more real than the existent present, but with a distinct foreboding:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good:—
If ill, why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor:
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man,
That function is smother’d in surmise,
And nothing is, but what is not.
(1.3.130-42)

Together, this ambitious couple span the range of humanity's attitudes towards the future, one hoping for what she regards as the best, the other fearing what he imagines could be the worst.17 Yet, both are contemplating the same prospect: Macbeth's doing whatever might be necessary to seize the kingship.

Precisely because we do not know ‘what the future has in store’ for us, but often would like to, we have a natural interest in prediction and prophecy—indeed, in some people the eagerness to “look into the seeds of time” and know beforehand “which grain will grow, and which will not” renders them exceedingly gullible. But even a sceptic would be impressed when what seemed a most unlikely prophecy is promptly confirmed. In any event, one can be sure it is no mere coincidence that the first mention of ‘prediction’ comes in the same speech as the first mentions of both ‘hope’ and ‘fear.’ The three witches having in turn “all-hail’d” Macbeth, it is Banquo who responds, “Good Sir, why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?” Then turning back to the witches, he continues, “My noble partner / You greet with present grace and great prediction / Of noble having, and of royal hope, / That he seems rapt withal: to me you speak not” (1.3.51-7). Whereupon he solicits a prediction on his own behalf, and receives their fateful, equivocal answers:

1ST Witch:
Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

2ND Witch:
Not so happy, yet much happier.

3RD Witch:
Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none ...

It is the witches' array of predictions to these two warrior chieftains that sets in motion all the subsequent events of the play.

First, what both Macbeths prefer now to think has been “promis'd” them (1.3.120; 1.5.13, 16) congeals their determination to murder Duncan—and we must notice that this is Lord Macbeth's immediate interpretation of “shalt be King hereafter”: that it is a suggestion to do something “whose horrid image” makes his heart pound and his hair stand on end. This despite the Thaneship of Cawdor being so surprisingly confirmed “without [his] stir.” Only afterwards does it occur to him that “Chance” may also as readily crown him King (1.3.144). Almost surely, then, this is not the first time Macbeth has thought about regicide. It would hardly be surprising had the temptation of it been troubling his mind as he and Banquo tramped through the foul weather from those desperate battles in which they—not meek Duncan—saved the kingdom. Is this why the witches' pronouncements arouse in Macbeth the rapture which Banquo twice notes (57, 143), and why he is sure they have “more in them than mortal knowledge”—because they have read his mind (cf. 4.1.74)? On the
surface, it might seem that Shakespeare's Macbeths merely re-enact The Fall of Man, with the primary responsibility that of the Temptress Eve, in keeping with the traditional account. Examined more closely, however, one detects the author's somewhat different view: his Adam is no innocent, seduced into an act for which he showed no prior inclination.

Second, Banquo's having been implicated in the witches' prophecies has compromised him, thereby facilitating the initial success of Macbeth's bid to gain the crown under a cloak of legitimacy. For Banquo is the one person who is privy not only to the prophecy, but also to Macbeth's suspicious allusion to "that business" the very night of Duncan's murder: "If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis, it shall make honour for you"—a conversation cut short by Banquo's guarded "So I lose none in seeking to augment it" (2.1.20-9). Despite having suspicions about Macbeth's involvement in Duncan's assassination (as he later acknowledges), Banquo obviously does not voice them when at his own instigation they all "meet and question this most bloody piece of work, to know it further." Probably it was at this same meeting that Macbeth was named the new Sovereign (2.4.30-32). Banquo's passive complicity is confirmed shortly thereafter in his troubled soliloquy:

-Thou hast it now, King, Cawdor, Glamis, all,  
As the Weyward Women promis'd; and, I fear,  
Thou play'dst most fouly for't; yet it was said,  
It should not stand in thy posterity;  
But that myself should be the root and father  
Of many kings. If there come truth from them  
(As upon thee, Macbeth, their speeches shine),  
Why, by the verities on thee made good,  
May they not be my oracles as well,  
And set me up in hope.  

(3.1.1-10)

That is, Banquo sees the fulfilment of his own prophecy as dependent on the fulfilment of Macbeth's—to validate the witches' predictive powers, at the least, but also quite likely as a necessary step towards his own offspring's eventual success (cf. 15-18).

That would seem to be the way Macbeth sees it, too—and so he resolves to foreclose any such prospect by extinguishing forever Banquo's line, thereby hoping to subvert that part of the witches' prophecy. He may not have noticed it before, but once he has succeeded in becoming King he sees in Banquo a "royalty of nature … that … would be fear'd":

-When first they put the name of King upon me,  
And bade them speak to him; then, prophet-like,  
They hail'd him father to a line of kings:  
Upon my head they plac'd a fruitless crown,  
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,  
Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal hand,  
No son of mine succeeding.  

(3.1.56-63)

Fearing that Banquo may choose to further the realization of his prophecy the same way that Macbeth did, 'wrenching' crown and sceptre with an unlineal hand, he resolves to murder Banquo—the third pivotal consequence of the witches' initial set of predictions. That what Macbeth has in mind is paradoxical, even self-contradictory, should not be lost on us. For Shakespeare means hereby to show the paradox inherent in all human interest in prophecy, and consequently in the normal human posture towards the future. For the very
possibility of predictive certainty, such that one can have complete confidence in whatever is foretold, presupposes that the future is strictly determined, or ‘fated,’ and as such cannot be altered. Yet our interest in it stems not simply from curiosity, but from the practical desire to further our own good while avoiding anything bad—which, of course, presupposes that future outcomes are not fixed, but subject to discretionary action on our part.¹⁸

Now, one might object that there is no logical contradiction between the future—and hence all that happens in time—being strictly determined, on the one hand, and our consciously choosing the actions that of necessity lead to those predetermined outcomes, on the other (and that it is simply part of the necessary, determined order of things that we act under the illusion that we are free to choose, that we have ‘free will’). Consequently, Macbeth is doing nothing illogical in taking an active role in pursuing the kingship once it has been ‘promis’d’ him, rather than passively waiting for “Chance” to crown him: this can be seen—even by him—as doing his (predetermined) part to bring the prediction to its fulfilment, having ‘of necessity’ been moved to do so by its assurance of success. Ah, but what about his efforts to obstruct the prophecy regarding Banquo? True, one could argue that logically the cases are the same, that his ‘futile’ efforts are equally part of the Master Plan, essential to its final outcome. And for the sake of argument, it may be conceded that this might be so. But what about psycho-logically? No rational person acts out of a motive to ‘fulfill the future’ per se, regardless of what it may be. Neither we, nor other living things, are ‘neutral’ in our nature: we pursue what we perceive to be our good, not The Future. Macbeth may have seen his murder of Duncan as simply doing his part to further fate as it has been revealed to him, but he surely cannot see his murder of Banquo in this way. The point is, he, like most people, has a contradictory attitude towards predictions of the future. Those that seem to favour him do not just suggest a possibility, or merely inspire hope; they impart confidence and a sense of legitimacy, a feeling that ‘this is how things were meant to be.’ Thus, Siward can describe Macbeth ensconced at Dunsinane as “the confident tyrant” (5.4.8; cf. 5.3.2-10). Whereas predictions that threaten him arouse fear and a will to evade—not, that is, acceptance, resignation, and despair. This ‘double’ or ‘equivocal’ attitude towards predictions reflects his ambivalence about the future itself: sometimes (or in certain respects) regarding it as fixed by fate, other times acting as if it were undetermined, hence, amenable to the influence of human volition.

Several times Macbeth in effect admits as much. When after the Banquo-haunted banquet he resolves purposefully to seek out the Weyward Sisters (a fourth pivotal consequence of his first, apparently chance, meeting with them; 1.3.154), he tells his wife: “More shall they speak; for now I am bent to know, / By the worst means, the worst. For mine own good, / All causes shall give way” (3.4.133-5). He wants to know the worst in order to avoid it, in the pursuit of his own good (as would anyone). The possibility of there being such knowledge before the fact, however, presupposes a determined world-system, as unalterable (hence, predictable) as the planets in their motions—that the “causes” will not “give way.” When later at the Pit of Acheron the warning of the First Apparition (“beware Macduff”) is seemingly contradicted by the exhortation of the Second (“Be bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn / The power of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth”), his response betrays the quite normal, and in that sense, natural doubt in his mind as to whether his should be a passive or an active role in protecting himself:

Then live, Macduff: what need I fear of thee?  
But yet I'll make assurance double sure, 
And take a bond of Fate: thou shalt not live; 
That I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies, 
And sleep in spite of thunder.

(4.1.82-6)

Having been offered still further “security” by the Third Apparition (“Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be, until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him”), Macbeth insists on the witches telling him one thing more: “shall Banquo's issue ever reign in this kingdom?” Because the answer they “show his
eyes” does indeed “grieve his heart” (110), he reacts to their vanishing with a most ironic curse: “Infected be the air whereon they ride; / And damn’d all those that trust them!” (138-9)—for as his confidence almost to the bitter end proves, he continues to trust the parts of their prophecies that he wishes to be true, those that seem to guarantee him protection, and thus free him from fear. He is clearly shaken when Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane (“I pull in resolution; and begin / To doubt th’equivocation of the fiend, / That lies like truth” 5.5.42-4). Still, his “better part of man” is only finally cow’d upon learning that Macduff was not naturally born of woman, but “from his mother’s womb untimely ripp’d.” Too late he realizes how the Instruments of Darkness have played upon his hopes and fears: “And be these juggling fiends no more believ’d, / That palter with us in a double sense; / That keep the word of promise to our ear, / And break it to our hope” (5.8.19-22).

Notes

1. Much as Plato has Sokrates attest in the Republic 509a-c.
2. This may be as fitting a place as any to note a stylistic feature of Macbeth: it abounds in triads. For in addition to the three witches who “All hail” Macbeth three times (1.3.48-50), then likewise thrice “Hail” Banquo (prefacing their three-part prophecy regarding him; 62-7), and whose magical chants and charms involve multiples of three (“Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine, / And thrice again, to make up nine”—35-6; and, “Thrice the brinded cat hath mew’d.” “Thrice, and once the hedge-pig whin’d”—4.1.1-2); there are Macbeth's three titles (Glamis, Cawdor, King), and his three portrayed crimes (the murder of Duncan, the ambush of Banquo, the slaughter of Macduff’s household). Several triads figure in the Porter’s scene: his repeated “Knock, knock, knock” (2.3.3, 12-13); his welcoming three sinners to Hell (farmer, equivocator, English tailor); the “three things” he reminds us that drink “is a great provoker of” (25-7). There is the surprising return of a trio (Macbeth, Lenox, and Rosse; 88), whereas only two left to view the site of Duncan's murder. There are three murderers who set upon Banquo and Fleance. Macbeth alludes to three avine instruments used by “Augures” (magpies, crows, rooks; 3.4.124). There are Malcolm’s three false self-accusations (lust, avarice, and a lack of all “king-becoming graces”; 4.3.60, 78, 91). It is on his third night of watching that the Scottish Doctor at last views the somnambulent, somniloquent Lady Macbeth (5.1.1-2). When Hecate arrives at the Pit of Acheron, she is accompanied by three more witches (4.1.38). And at the Pit, Macbeth sees a succession of three “Apparitions,” offering three prophecies (each of the first two begin “Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth!”; to the second, Macbeth confusedly replies, “Had I three ears, I’d hear thee”—77-8). Macbeth calls three times for Seyton before he finally appears (5.3.18, 20, 29). According to the Folio text, the play comprises twenty-seven scenes, i.e., 3³. This triadic pattern lends further support to the surmise that there must be, not two, but three battles referred to at the beginning of the play, involving all three great warrior captains (Macbeth, Banquo, and Macduff).

As for what significance one might see in this pattern, several possibilities suggest themselves. For example, one might suspect a kind of ‘black’ counterpart to Trinitarian Christianity. But it also reminds one of the ‘threeness’ so evident in the most famous Platonic dialogues (i.e., the Apology of Sokrates and the Republic). And given the prominence of Time in the play (a matter to be discussed at length in this examination of the play), its manifold triads are stylistic echoes of the ever-moving sectors of Past, Present, and Future. T. McAlindon, in Shakespeare's Tragic Cosmos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), begins his useful discussion of the symbolic dimension of the play by observing: “One of the most remarkable features of this tragedy is the way in which number symbolism cooperates with nature symbolism in the process of signalling key ideas relating to the tragic theme of disunity and chaos. This may be largely due to the fact that here, as in Julius Caesar, Shakespeare the tragedian shows a more than usual interest in time, the movement of the heavenly bodies, and history. The tradition of numerical symbolism and the temporal sensibility were closely related in literature since there was a natural connection between the time sense, astronomy, and the art of exact measurement according to number” (200). McAlindon stresses especially “the traditional
association of the number three with the rituals of witchcraft.”

3. Each of the play's first three scenes begin with one of these questions: 'When,’ ‘What,’ ‘Where.’ The first explicit use of 'why' is Banquo's query upon noticing Macbeth's reaction to the witches' all-hailing him: “Good Sir, why do you start, and seem to fear things that do sound so fair?” (1.3.51-2). Good question.

4. Knights, in *Some Shakespearean Themes*, also views the witches' chant as announcing the play's primary thematic focus, but construes it somewhat differently: “In none of the tragedies is there anything superfluous, but it is perhaps *Macbeth* that gives the keenest impression of economy. The action moves directly and quickly to the crisis, and from the crisis to the full working out of plot and theme. The pattern is far easier to grasp than that of *Lear*. The main theme of the reversal of values is given out simply and clearly in the first scene—‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair’; and with it are associated premonitions of the conflict, disorder and moral darkness into which Macbeth will plunge himself” (122).

However, Bradshaw, in *Shakespeare's Scepticism*, questions whether the ‘main theme’ is really that simple and clear: “Yet ‘Faire is foule’ is ambiguous. Instead of providing an indirect confirmation of the conceptual abstractions it may assert their *unreality*, in relation to the elemental ‘Hurley-burley’ (that word suggests amoral Chaos rather than immoral Evil), and to the obscene, elemental savagery of battles which are (in a comparably ambiguous way) ‘lost and wonne’” (223).

5. This is easily illustrated by the unreliability of sensory evidence with respect to the reality of Matter, which according to any plausible account (from those of Plato or Aristotle to that of modern physics) is very different from what we perceive it to be. According to modern physicists, this ‘too solid flesh’ is anything but: were the bodies of the earth's entire human population fully compressed in the gravitational field of a ‘black hole,’ the resulting ‘solid matter’ (they tell us) would scarce fill one fortieth of a tablespoon!

6. Wilson Knight, in *The Wheel of Fire*, sees this as the root cause of both his torment and his vice: “Whilst Macbeth lives in conflict with himself there is misery, evil, fear: when, at the end, he and others have openly identified himself with evil, he faces the world fearless: nor does he appear evil any longer. The worst element of his suffering has been that secrecy and hypocrisy so often referred to throughout the play … Dark secrecy and night are in Shakespeare ever the badges of crime. But at the end Macbeth has no need of secrecy” (156).

7. The dramatic effectiveness of Shakespeare's oft-remarked ‘trickery’ with time, not noticeable to spectators but puzzling to reflective readers, is itself revealing about human temporality: how the felt experience of time need not correspond to ‘objective’ measures of time; and how much freedom the rational imagination allows in the manipulation of time.

8. Francis Berry, in an essay entitled ‘*Macbeth*: Tense and Mood,’ calls attention to a related grammatical feature of the play in *Essays in Shakespearean Criticism*, J. E. Calderwood and H. E. Toliver, eds. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970, 521-9): “The Form of the Verb of *Macbeth*, that which controls the whole plot, is peculiarly striking. It is, of course, the Future Indicative. But the dominant form of the Verb ‘in’ *Macbeth*, that which animates not the main outlines but the detail of passage, is also significant. It is the Subjunctive. The Verb Form ‘of’ *Macbeth* and the Verb Form ‘in’ *Macbeth* struggle against each other, and from this struggle issues the tragedy” (521).

Berry goes on to observe, “Indeed, the whole play is Future minded, thus. … Unlike *Hamlet* and *Othello* there are in it no temporal flashbacks, no protracted memories of earlier generations, no narrations of past events, but it purely and avidly pursues a Future, and that is why reader and audience derive from it a sensation of rapidity or hurrying” (522). As for Macbeth himself, he exists mainly “in the subjunctive realm of possibilities—the realm of hopes and dreads; of ‘ifs’ and phantasies; of what may be and may not be; of what ought to be and what ought not to be. The Subjunctive is a private realm” (523).
9. Michael Davis, in his article entitled ‘Courage and Impotence in Shakespeare's Macbeth,’ in Shakespeare's Political Pageant, Joseph Alulis and Vickie Sullivan, eds. (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), points to the broader connections and implications of Banquo's challenge to the witches (“If you can look into the seeds of time …”) by observing: “The witches must represent time past, present, and future because the future is not independent of the past. Time has seeds. Events done in the present grow in the soil of past events and have consequences for the future … The entire play subsequent to the regicide may be described in terms of Macbeth's struggle against the consequences of his earlier actions. His battle is not so much a battle for a specific future as a battle against the past. And yet his every attempt to right the situation sinks him deeper into enslavement by the past” (231).


11. Epitomized by old Kephalos in Plato's Republic 331d-e.

12. As Howard White puts it in his essay entitled “Macbeth and the Tyrannical Man,” Interpretation 2 (Winter 1971, 148), “I submit that the difficulty with Hamlet is similar to the difficulty of Macbeth. They are not sure whether they believe or not.” Macbeth's famous soliloquy (1.7.1-28) reveals the conflicting feelings at war within his soul. Wilson Knight, in The Wheel of Fire, however, sees Macbeth's confusion as more formless than it is: “With Macbeth it is almost impossible to fit clear terms of conceptual thought to the motives tangled in his mind or soul. Therein lies the fine truth of the Macbeth conception: a deep, poetic, psychology or metaphysic of the birth of evil. He himself is hopelessly at a loss, and has little idea as to why he is going to murder Duncan. He tries to fit names to his reasons—‘ambition,’ for instance—but this is only a name. The poet's mind is here at grips with the problem of spiritual evil—the inner state of disintegration, disharmony and fear, from which is born an act of crime and destruction” (121).

F. R. Leavis, in Education and the University (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979; originally published 1943), seems to have a better grasp of what essentially is going on beneath the puzzling, yet strangely effective imagery Shakespeare provides Macbeth in this soliloquy:

It is a speech that exhibits Shakespeare's specific genius—an essentially poetic genius that is at the same time essentially dramatic—at its most marvelous. The speech is that of the intensely realized individual, Macbeth, at the particular, intensely realized moment in the development of the poem. Analysis leads us directly to the core of the drama, its central, animating interests, the principles of its life. The whole organism is present in the part. Macbeth, weighing his hesitation, tells himself that it is no moral or religious scruple, deriving its disturbing force from belief in supernatural sanctions. His fear, he says, regards merely the chances of lasting practical success in this world. His shrinking from the murder expresses, he insists, a simple consideration of expediency. Then he proceeds to enlarge on the peculiar heinousness of murdering Duncan, and as he does so that essential datum concerning his make-up, his ignorance of himself, becomes plain. He supposes that he is developing the note of inexpediency, and picturing the atrocity of the crime as it will affect others. But already in the sentence invoking the sanctity of hospitality another note begins to prevail. And in the next sentence the speech achieves its unconscious self-confutation …

What we have in this passage is a conscience-tormented imagination, quick with terror of the supernatural, proclaiming a certitude that ‘murder will out,’ a certitude appalling to Macbeth not because of consequences on ‘this bank and shoal of time,’ but by reason of a sense of sin—the radical hold on him of religious sanctions.
This is an opportune point at which to address Evans's radical contention in *Shakespeare's Tragic Practice* that in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare uses his powerful poetry to 'hoodwink' us into believing that it is “the tragedy of an ‘essentially good man’ whose principles give way to overmastering ambition and who thereafter undergoes moral deterioration, experiencing all the while those agonies of conscience that, indeed, only an essentially good man can experience” (218). Whereas Evans insists that:

What sets [Macbeth] most significantly below our level of vision is the fact that the idea of murder has invaded his mind. It is noteworthy that the witches have not mentioned murder or suggested any wrongful act …

His plane is in fact not one of moral awareness, but of moral ignorance; and from this plane he never rises. From beginning to end of the action he remains oblivious of murder as a moral fault.

(200)

*Macbeth* is not the tragedy of a good man's moral deterioration, but of a man who lives and dies without knowing what moral sense means.

(208)

As for the famous soliloquy (1.7.1-28) Leavis so insightfully analysed, Evans sees in it only evidence of Macbeth's “fatal limitation: his lack of moral sense” (201). “Macbeth's flaw is not a defective moral mechanism that gives in to his overweening ambition; it is rather his total lack of a moral mechanism” (204). And in sum, “The crucial gap between Macbeth's awareness and ours is simply that we have a moral sense and he has none” (204); he is a “moral cripple” (221), a “moral idiot” (222). Much of Evans's chapter on *Macbeth* is devoted to explaining away textual evidence that could be interpreted as showing some moral concern—and he resorts to some dubious ‘practices’ of his own in doing so—but the real issue here is Evans's hypertrophied Kantian conception of what it means to be moral: something utterly divorced from consequences, such that every time Macbeth shows himself concerned with his actions' effect on him (e.g., his reaction to the thought of murdering Duncan, 200; his revulsion in the immediate wake of Duncan's murder, 206; his plea to the Doctor to cure Lady Macbeth, 212), it is discounted as having any genuine moral content—as if a perfectly respectable response to ‘Why be moral?’ is not ‘Because otherwise you will experience relentless psychic torment.’ Indeed, according to Plato's *Republic*, the effect of one's actions on one's own soul is the natural ground of what properly defines that which we call ‘moral’ (443c-e). But Evans, who seems unaware that his implicit Kantianism is anachronistic when applied to Shakespeare, apparently believes that every whole human being has a distinct ‘moral sensibility’ that is supposed to judge and rule without regard to consequences (blithely conflating it with ‘conscience’; 217)—that thereby everyone not radically defective ‘knows’ murder is just wrong (220). Consequently, even to ask ‘Why be moral?’ is evidence that one is defective. Evans simply could not take Machiavelli seriously, i.e., as possibly being right. Hence his chapter has a value he never intended, namely, that of demonstrating how radically impractical, thus impolitic—indeed utopian—this conception of morality actually is.

In the case of the smallest or of the greatest happiness …, it is always the same thing that makes happiness happiness: the ability to forget or, expressed in more scholarly fashion, the capacity to feel *unhistorically* during its duration. He who cannot sink down on the threshold of the moment and forget all the past, who cannot stand balanced like a goddess of victory without growing dizzy and afraid, will never know what happiness is—worse, he will never do anything to make others happy. Imagine the extremest possible example of a man who did not possess the power of forgetting at all and who was thus condemned to see everywhere a state of becoming: such a man would no longer believe in his own being, would no longer believe in himself, would see everything flowing asunder in moving points and would lose himself in this stream of becoming …

(62)

14. *The Prince*, ch. 17: “For one can say this generally of men: that they are ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and dissemblers, evaders of dangers, eager for gain. While you do them good, they are yours, offering you their blood, property, lives, and children … when the need for them is far away; but, when it is close to you, they revolt. And that prince who has founded himself entirely on their words, stripped of other preparation, is ruined; for friendships that are acquired at a price and not with greatness and nobility of spirit are bought, but they are not owned and when the time comes they cannot be spent” (66). Also relevant is what is said in ch. 7: “And whoever believes that among great personages new benefits will make old injuries be forgotten deceives himself” (33).

15. Jane Austen provides the heroine of *Mansfield Park* a pertinent observation on this matter. Fanny Price is reflecting on the humble topic of domestic landscape:

‘Every time I come into this shrubbery I am more struck with its growth and beauty. Three years ago, this was nothing but a rough hedgerow along the upper side of the field, never thought of as anything, or capable of becoming anything; and now it is converted into a walk, and it would be difficult to say whether most valuable as a convenience or an ornament; and perhaps in another three years we may be forgetting—almost forgetting what it was before. How wonderful, how very wonderful the operations of time, and the changes of the human mind!’ And following the latter train of thought, she soon afterwards added: ‘If any one faculty of our nature may be called *more* wonderful than the rest, I do think it is memory. There seems something more speakingly incomprehensible in the powers, the failures, the inequalities of memory, than in any other of our intelligences. The memory is sometimes so retentive, so serviceable, so obedient—at others, so bewildered and so weak—and at others again, so tyrannic, so beyond our controul! We are to be sure a miracle every way—but our powers of recollecting and forgetting, do seem peculiarly past finding out.’

(vol. 2, ch. 4)

16. The view ‘that to philosophize is to learn how to die’ could be said to originate with Sokrates. Cf. *Apollogy* 29a, 40c-41d, *Republic* 486a, 500b-c, 604b-c, 608c-d. See also Montaigne's essay of that title (No. 20 of Book One in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, Donald Frame, ed. and trans., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958).

17. That Macbeth does not altogether welcome the “suggestion” which his own irrepressible ambition forces upon his imagination lends credence to R. S. Crane's view of his character, ‘Monistic Criticism and the Structure of Shakespearean Drama,’ in *Approaches to Shakespeare*, Norman Rabkin, ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 99-120: ‘For the essential story of *Macbeth* is that of a man, not naturally depraved, who has fallen under the compulsive power of an imagined better state for himself which he can attain only by acting contrary to his normal habits and feelings; who attains this state
and finds that he must continue to act thus, and even worse, in order to hold on to what he has got; who persists and becomes progressively hardened morally in the process; and who then, ultimately, when the once alluring good is about to be taken away from him, faces the loss in terms of what is left of his original character” (116).

Paul A. Cantor also emphasizes the importance of imagination in determining the behaviour of the Macbeths in his article entitled ‘Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: The Wise Man as Hero,’ *Shakespeare Quarterly* (Spring 1980), 64-75:

The theatrical imagery of prologues and acts points to the element common to the real usurpers of *Macbeth* and the would-be usurpers of *The Tempest*: the way they plot out their crimes with the imagination of a playwright … Antonio tempts Sebastian in just the way the Witches and later Lady Macbeth tempt Macbeth, by making him imagine himself already a king … A ‘strong imagination’ seems characteristic of Shakespeare’s usurpers: they can leap ahead in their minds to picture themselves already possessed of what they most desire …

The usurper’s strong imagination is what makes him potentially forceful as a character. Believing that what his imagination shows him is real, the usurper can proceed with strength and conviction to achieve his goals. But to impress us, the usurper must in fact act … The mere desire to rule proves nothing: to distinguish oneself, one must show the force of one’s desires by acting upon them. As the term is ordinarily understood, one can be heroic only in deed, not in thought. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth undergo the heroic test of translating their thoughts into deeds. Though they both bend under the strain of trying to realize their dreams, and Lady Macbeth eventually cracks, they do have a chance to establish their heroic stature. They are not run-of-the-mill human beings; they are greatsouled figures, if only in the single-minded determination with which they pursue their ambitions.

(69)

The treatment of usurpation in *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* reveals the limitations in the usurper’s imagination, the way the force of his desires deceives him about reality. He thinks he knows what his crime will entail, but in his eagerness he underestimates the obstacles that stand in his way and overestimates his ability to live with the consequences of his deed.

(71)

18. Michael Davis (‘Courage and Impotence’) recognizes that Macbeth's behaviour is contradictory, but doesn't quite get to the source of its inconsistency:

On the surface, one who disdains fortune should have no truck with fortune-tellers. Macbeth feels this tension, and so his attitude toward the witches is throughout the play equivocal. On the one hand, he acts out of the belief that what they say is true; on the other hand, he acts on his own in order to be doubly sure … This attitude is certainly understandable—no use taking chances. At the same time, however, it is patently ridiculous. To know one's fate is to neutralize chance. To think that prophecy needs assurances is to doubt that it is prophecy … He believes [the witches] enough to worry about Banquo, but not enough to give up all attempts to forestall the future they predict. He doubts and does not doubt that what they say about the future is correct.
But this is not the root of the problem. One can be dubious about prophecy, hence ‘cover one's bet,’ without being caught in a contradiction, so long as one is consistent. As we shall see, Macbeth's real confusion is about Time itself, and all that happens ‘in time,’ such that he finds security in some pronouncements while undertaking to forestall others. Davis goes on to speak of what he regards as “a more serious difficulty with Macbeth's view of prophecy. He traffics with preternatural beings, beings who do things no man can do, and yet it does not occur to him for a moment that, having defied the ordinary course of nature in one respect, they might well be able to do so in other respects.” Again, this is not strictly so; if the natural order is determined, knowledge of the future would in principle be possible without violating any natural laws (though gaining such knowledge may be beyond ordinary human capacities). However, in observing that “Foreknowledge, which appears to ensure courage, in the end makes it impossible to consider oneself courageous” (228), Davis does make an important point in as much as Macbeth's self-esteem is based on his courage.

**Macbeth (Vol. 80): Further Reading**

**CRITICISM**


*Reviews Japanese director Yukio Ninagawa's 2002 staging of Macbeth in Brooklyn, focusing on Ninagawa's theatrical career and his thematic evocation of mortality in the production.*


*Presents seven essays on Macbeth by Bloom and other noted contemporary critics on subjects including power, ambition, and Macbeth's criminal mind.*


*Surveys the language of Macbeth from its “extravagant rhetoric and dense metaphor” to its poetic devices and varied imagery.*


*Surveys the language, sources, and stage and textual histories of Macbeth.*


*Presents dozens of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century documents that offer insight into the cultural, historical, and literary contexts of Macbeth.*

Explores Macbeth as a tragic incarnation of courage that, when pushed to its limits, is self-annihilating.


Discusses the stage architecture and iconography employed in the earliest stage productions of Macbeth.


Probes the influence of the New Testament Book of Revelation and the writings of King James, including his Basilikon Doron (1603) and Daemonologie (1597), on Macbeth.


Comments on the “failure of didacticism” in Macbeth, examining parallels and contrasts between the execution of the Thane of Cawdor for treason in the first act of the drama and the means of Macbeth's own demise at its conclusion.


Presents a feminist, psychoanalytic account of Lady Macbeth that emphasizes her symbolic position as a hysterical mother and witch figure in the misogynistic social world of Macbeth.


Provides a brief, positive assessment of Ed Hall's 2002 production of Macbeth at the Albery Theatre in London, lauding the director's ability to effectively convey the emotional sweep of the drama to modern audiences.


Discovers a cathartic finality in Macbeth’s encounter with “ambition, murder, guilt, fear, and ultimate destruction” that draws audiences into an imaginative sympathy with him.


Comments on the hollowness and ambivalence of Macbeth's “vaulting ambition,” asserting that nihilism is the guiding philosophical principle in Macbeth.

Macbeth (Vol. 90): Introduction

Macbeth

Literary scholars generally agree that Shakespeare wrote Macbeth sometime around 1606—after James VI of Scotland ascended to the English throne as James I in 1603 and before the tragedy's first recorded performance at the Globe Theatre in 1611. The principal source for the play is Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland (1577), although critics have pointed out that Shakespeare manipulated certain aspects of the historical record to reinforce James I's claim to the English crown. Given
that Macbeth is Shakespeare's briefest tragedy by far, many literary historians have speculated that the 1623 Folio edition of the play is based on a substantially revised quarto version that has since been lost. Indeed, many late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century critics have continued to speculate on the play's uncertain textual and performance origins, but to date these scholars have discovered no new evidence to support their theories. Another recent critical trend has focused on a close analysis of the language in Macbeth, demonstrating that it exposes the discursive and the representational limitations of the tragic genre, that linguistic models of duplicity shape the play, and that the witches' poetic discourse is echoed repetitively by the other characters. In addition, a number of recent commentators have analyzed several dichotomies in Macbeth, such as the protagonist's vacillation between static philosopher and active murderer, the clash of nihilism and existentialism, and the conflict between a heroic pagan ethic and Christian values of conscience and meekness.

Several modern critical discussions of the character of Macbeth have explored various aspects of his inner psychological conflict. In his 1990 essay, H. W. Fawkner argues that absence is the central structural theme of Macbeth and analyzes the protagonist as a character who remains distanced from his own actions. Piotr Sadowski (2001) asserts that Macbeth is chiefly concerned with his masculinity as he progresses from a state marked by honor and conscience to a state in which he becomes preoccupied with remorseless ambition and the consolidation of power. Paul A. Cantor (2000) identifies a fundamental tension in Macbeth between the heroic pagan ethic and Christian values associated with conscience and meekness. According to Cantor, Macbeth's attempt to synthesize these antithetical values causes him to conceive of a debased form of absolutism that negates both ethics systems and corrupts his perspective of the natural order. Tzachi Zamir (2000) contrasts the philosophical implications of Macbeth's nihilistic preoccupation with the absence of value and temporality with Macduff's emotional and highly temporal existentialism.

Theater critics have praised Gregory Doran's 1999-2000 Royal Shakespeare Company production of Macbeth as one of the more successful attempts in recent years at staging Shakespeare's tragedy. Presented in modern dress, the production emphasized the stark, timeless influence of evil and the devastating impact of its corrupting influence on human ambition. Further, as Katherine Duncan-Jones (1999) points out, Doran's textual cuts successfully transformed the play “from historical melodrama to contemporary psychodrama.” Yet, despite their approbation for the production, many reviewers argued that Doran's visual style sometimes created a sense of dislocation or incoherence that undermined the overall integrity of his artistic vision. In contrast to Doran's production, Terry Hands's 2000 staging of Macbeth has been considered one of the most notorious modern interpretations of the tragedy. Conceived as a vanity project for the popular American television actor Kelsey Grammer, the production was a theatrical debacle marred by shabby production values, declamatory acting, and a lack of directorial insight. Critics nearly unanimously maligned Grammer's portrayal of Macbeth, arguing that while the actor spoke Shakespeare's verse clearly, he nevertheless recreated a one-dimensional, dispassionate, and dowdy tragic figure. Commentators were much more receptive to Yukio Ninagawa's 2002 touring production of the play, which included a hall-of-mirrors set, sumptuous costumes from a number of historical periods, choreographed fight sequences, and real horses ridden by Duncan and Malcolm. Most critics agreed that one of the director's most intriguing innovations was to cast young actors in the roles of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. As a result, David A. Rosenberg (2003) observed, “Shakespeare's tragedy became the story of a young couple who find themselves steeped way over their heads in blood.” Ultimately, theater reviewers applauded Ninagawa for presenting what Bruce Weber (see Further Reading) termed a “gaudily stylish but undeniably exciting” reading of Macbeth.

Many modern critics assert that the text of Macbeth reveals several clues about its genesis. Garry Wills (1995) examines the specific placement of stage directions, textual cues for clothing and props, and alternative emendations for proscribed editorial revisions to propose a number of ways in which Macbeth might have been more clearly perceived by a Jacobean audience than by a modern one. Similarly, Stephen Orgel (2002) comments on the dynamic theatrical processes and ideological concerns that might have influenced revisions of the play prior to the publication of the 1623 Folio. Orgel focuses on the evolving dramatic treatment of the
witches as a reflection of the changing mores and cultural attitudes of each new generation that reinterprets
the tragedy. Rebecca Lemon (2002) applies the notion of equivocation and Jacobean ideological concerns to
the language of Macbeth, demonstrating that the duplicitous didacticism inherent in the scaffold speeches of
condemned Elizabethan and Jacobean traitors shapes the political tone of the play. Lemon concludes that
while such language infuses the speech of the traitors Cawdor and Macbeth, Malcolm also adopts this
linguistic model of dissimulation to orchestrate his own claim to the Scottish monarchy. In another semantic
study of Shakespeare's tragedy, David L. Kranz (2003) analyzes the structural and thematic implications of
repetitive verse, indicating that the witches' words are echoed in the linguistic patterns of the other characters.

**Macbeth (Vol. 90): Criticism: Overviews And General Studies**

SOURCE: Orgel, Stephen. “Macbeth and the Antic Round.” In *The Authentic Shakespeare and Other

*In the following essay, Orgel comments on the dynamic theatrical processes and ideological concerns that
might have influenced revisions of Macbeth prior to the publication of the 1623 Folio. The critic focuses on
the dramatic treatment of the witches in particular as a reflection of the changing mores and cultural attitudes
of each new generation that reinterprets the tragedy.*

I begin my consideration of Macbeth some years before the folio, for what seem to me good historical
reasons: while it is certainly true, as historians of the book from Stanley Morison to D. F. McKenzie and
Randall McLeod have insisted, that works of literature do not exist independent of their material embodiment
in texts, the printing of Shakespeare's plays is, nevertheless, really incidental. In their inception, in their
conception, they are not books but scripts, designed to be realized in performance; and in this form they are
not at all fixed by their material embodiment, whether quarto or folio (to say nothing of Riverside, Oxford, or
Pelican), but fluid and open-ended. To realize them requires an infinite number of collaborative, often
non-authorial, decisions, both textual and interpretive, which in turn eventuate in continual, increasingly
non-authorial, revisions, excisions, additions. In this respect, Shakespeare plays have always been the
free-floating signifiers of postmodern theory, standing for an infinitely variable range of signifieds. As I have
argued in “What Is a Text,” the play, even in print, is always a process.

In the case of Macbeth, we are well into the process from the outset, since the earliest surviving version of the
play, that included in the folio, is demonstrably a revision. It includes songs for the witches, given in the text
only as incipits ('Come away, come away, etc.'; 'Black spirits, etc.'). These are songs from Middleton's play
The Witch. In performance they would have been accompanied by dances, which means that in the theater
these scenes took a good deal longer than they do on the page. The manuscript of Davenant's version of the
play, prepared around 1664, includes the whole text of the witches' songs from Middleton—these are really
musical dialogues, short scenes. The fact that Davenant did not supply his own witches' material at these
points, as he did elsewhere, suggests that the Middleton material was already a standard feature of the play.

The elaboration of the witches' roles could have taken place anywhere up to about fifteen years after the play
was first performed, but the presence of the Middleton songs suggests that Shakespeare was no longer around
to do the revising, which presumes a date after 1614. Why, only a decade after the play was written, would
augmenting the witches' roles have seemed a good idea? To begin with, by 1610 or so witchcraft, magic, and
the diabolical were good theater business—Barnabe Barnes's The Devil's Charter was at the Globe in the
same season as Macbeth, and Marston's The Wonder of Women, with its sorcery scenes, was at the
Blackfriars. Jonson's Masque of Queens, performed at court in 1609, inaugurated a decade of sorcery plays
and masques, including The Tempest, The Alchemist, The Witch, The Witch of Edmonton, The Devil Is an Ass,
and the revived and rewritten Doctor Faustus.
The ubiquitousness of theatrical magic is perhaps sufficient reason for the elaboration of the witches in *Macbeth,* but for me, it does not account for everything. When Macbeth, after the murder of Banquo, goes to consult the witches, and they show him a terrifying vision of Banquo's heirs, Hecate proposes a little entertainment to cheer him up:

I'll charm the air to give a sound  
While you perform your antic round,  
That this great king may kindly say  
Our duties did his welcome pay.

(4.1.151-4)

The tone of the scene here changes significantly: the witches are not professional and peremptory any more, they are lighthearted, gracious, and deferential. We may choose to treat this as a moment of heavy irony, though Macbeth does not seem to respond to it as such; but if it is not ironic, the change of tone suggests that the ‘great king’ addressed in this passage is not the king on stage, but instead a real king in the audience, Banquo's descendant and the king of both Scotland and England.

The editors of both the recent Oxford and Cambridge editions have resisted the suggestion that this moment in *Macbeth* reflects the local conditions of a court performance, observing that nothing in the scene positively requires such an assumption. This is true enough, but I also see nothing implausible about it, and though there is no record of a court performance, King James surely must have wanted to see a play that included both witches and his ancestors. What are the implications if we assume that the text we have is a revision to take into account the presence of the king, and that his interest in witchcraft also accounts for the augmentation of the witches' scenes, so that the ‘filthy,’ ‘black and midnight hags’ become graciously entertaining after they have finished being ominously informative? Such a play would be significantly less author-centered than our familiar text: first because it is reviser-centered—and the presence of the Middleton scenes implies that Shakespeare was not the reviser—and second, because it is patron-centered, taking a particular audience into account. To this extent Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is already, in the folio version, a significantly collaborative enterprise. But if this is correct, it also means that this version of *Macbeth* is a special case, devised for a single occasion, a performance at court, not the play in repertory, the play for the public.

This leads us to another question: how did this text become the ‘standard’ version—why was it the right version to include in the folio? It needs to be emphasized that this is a question whether we assume that a performance before the king is involved or not: there is no denying that this is a revised text with non-Shakespearean material. Most attempts to deal with this issue beg the question, assuming that what we have is indeed the wrong text, and that Shakespeare's first editors would never have included it if they had had any alternative. The right text, the text we want (the promptbook, or even better, Shakespeare's holograph) must have been unavailable, lost—burned, perhaps, in the destruction of the Globe in 1613, as if only a conflagration could explain the refusal of Hemminge and Condell (who promise, after all, ‘the true original copies’) to give us what we want. But perhaps it was included precisely because it was the right text—whether because by 1620 this, quite simply, was the play, or, more interestingly, because the best version of the play was the one that included the king.

This would make it an anomaly in the folio, a version of the play prepared for a single, special occasion, rather than the standard public theater version. In fact, the play as it stands in the folio is anomalous in a number of respects. It is a very unusual play textually: it is very short, the shortest of the tragedies (half the length of *Hamlet,* a third shorter than the average), shorter, too than all the comedies except *The Comedy of Errors.* It looks, moreover, as if the version we have has not only been augmented with witches' business, but has also been cut and rearranged, producing some real muddles in the narrative: for example, the scene between Lennox and the Lord, 3.6, reporting action that has not happened yet, or the notorious syntactic
puzzles of the account of the battle in the opening scenes, or the confusion of the final battle, in which Macbeth is slain onstage, and twenty lines later Macduff re-enters with his head. Revision and cutting were, of course, standard and necessary procedures in a theatre where the normal playing time was two hours; but if theatrical cuts are to explain the peculiarities of this text, why was it cut so peculiarly, not to say ineptly? Arguments that make the muddles not the result of cutting but an experiment in surreal and expressionistic dramaturgy only produce more questions, rendering the play a total anomaly, both in Shakespeare's work and in the drama of the period.

The very presence of the witches is unusual. Shakespeare makes use of the supernatural from time to time—ghosts in Richard III, Julius Caesar, and most notably in Hamlet, fairies and their magic in A Midsummer Night's Dream, Prospero's sorcery in The Tempest, Joan of Arc's and Marjory Jourdain's in the Henry VI plays, and Rosalind's claim to be a magician at the end of As You Like It—but there is no other play in which witches and witchcraft are such an integral element of the plot. Indeed, whether or not King James was in the audience, the fact that it is the witches who provide the royal entertainment can hardly be accidental. The king was intensely interested in witchcraft; his dialogue on the subject, Daemonology, first published in Edinburgh in 1597, was reissued upon his accession to the English throne in 1603—there were three editions in that year alone. This and the Basilicon Doron, his philosophy of kingship, were the two works that he chose to introduce himself to his English subjects, and as I have argued elsewhere, witchcraft and kingship have an intimate relationship in the Jacobean royal ideology. This is a culture in which the supernatural and witchcraft, even for sceptics, are as much part of reality as religious truth is. Like the ghost in Hamlet, the reality of the witches in Macbeth is not in question; the question, as in Hamlet, is why they are present and how far to believe them.

Like the ghost, too, the witches are quintessential theatrical devices: they dance and sing, perform wonders, appear and disappear, fly, produce visions—do, in short, all the things that, historically, we have gone to the theater to see. They open the play and set the tone for it. On Shakespeare's stage they would simply have materialized through a trap door, but Shakespeare's audience believed in magic already. Our rationalistic theater requires something more theatrically elaborate—not necessarily machinery, but some serious mystification. For Shakespeare's audience, the mystification is built into their physical appearance, which defies the categories: they look like men and are women. The indeterminacy of their gender is the first thing Banquo calls attention to. This is a defining element of their nature, a paradox that identifies them as witches: a specifically female propensity to evil—being a witch—is defined by its apparent masculinity. This also is, of course, one of the central charges leveled at Shakespeare's theater itself, the ambiguity of its gender roles—the fact that on Shakespeare's stage the women are really male. But the gender ambiguity relates as well to roles within the play—Lady Macbeth unsexes herself, and accuses her husband of being afraid to act like a man. What constitutes acting like a man in this play? Killing, obviously, but anything else? Lady Macbeth unsexing herself, after all, renders herself, unexpectedly, not a man but a child, and thus incapable of murder: 'Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't (2.2.12-13). Indeed, the definitive relation between murder and manhood applies to heroes as well as villains. When Macduff is told of the murder of his wife and children and is urged to 'Dispute it like a man,' he replies that he must first 'feel it as a man' (4.3.220-2). Whatever this says about his sensitivity and family feeling, it also says that murder is what makes you feel like a man.

The unsettling quality of the witches goes beyond gender. Their language is paradoxical; fair is foul and foul is fair; when the battle's lost and won. One way of looking at this is to say that it constitutes no paradox at all: any battle that is lost has also been won, but by somebody else. The person who describes a battle as lost and won is either on both sides or on neither; what is fair for one side is bound to be foul for the other. In a brilliantly subversive essay, Harry Berger, Jr., suggested that the witches are in fact right, and are telling the truth about the world of the play—that there really are no ethical standards in it, no right and wrong sides. Duncan certainly starts out sounding like a good king: the rhetoric of his monarchy is full of claims about its sacredness, about the deference that is due to it, how it is part of a natural hierarchy descending from God,
how the king is divinely anointed, and so forth. But in fact none of this is borne out by the play: Duncan's rule is utterly chaotic, and maintaining it depends on constant warfare—the battle that opens the play, after all, is not an invasion, but a rebellion. Duncan's rule has never commanded the deference it claims for itself—deference is not natural to it. In upsetting that sense of the deference Macbeth feels he owes to Duncan, maybe the witches are releasing into the play something the play both overtly denies and implicitly articulates: that there is no basis whatever for the values asserted on Duncan's behalf; that the primary characteristic of his rule, perhaps of any rule in the world of the play, is not order but rebellion.

Whether or not this is correct, it must be to the point that women are the ones who prompt this dangerous realization in Macbeth. The witches live outside the social order, but they embody its contradictions: beneath the woman's exterior is also a man; beneath the man's exterior is also a woman; nature is full of competing claims, not ordered and hierarchical but deeply anarchic; and to acknowledge that is to acknowledge the reality and force and validity of the individual will—to acknowledge that all of us have claims that conflict with the claims about deference and hierarchy. This is the same recognition that Edmund brings into *King Lear* when he invokes Nature as his goddess. It is a Nature that is not the image of divine order, but one in which the strongest and craftiest survive—and when they survive, they then go on to devise claims about Nature that justify their success, claims about hierarchies, natural law and order, the divine right of kings. Edmund is a villain, but if he were ultimately successful he would be indistinguishable from the Duncans and Malcolms (and James I's) of Shakespeare's world.

Here is a little history: the real Macbeth was, like Richard III, the victim of a gigantic and very effective publicity campaign. Historically, Duncan was the usurper—that is what the rebellion at the beginning of the play is about, though there is no way of knowing it from Shakespeare. Macbeth had a claim to the throne (Shakespeare does know this: Duncan at one point in the play refers to him as 'cousin' (1.4.14)—they were first cousins, both grandsons of King Malcolm II). Macbeth's murder of Duncan was a political assassination, and Macbeth was a popular hero because of it. The legitimate heir to the throne, whose rights have been displaced by the usurping Duncan, was Lady Macbeth. When Macbeth ascended the throne, he was ruling as Protector or Regent until Lady Macbeth's son came of age (she did have children—it is Shakespeare who deprives her and Macbeth of those heirs). Macbeth's defeat at the end of the play, by Malcolm and Macduff, constituted essentially an English invasion—the long-term fight was between native Scottish Celts and Anglo-Norman invaders, with continental allies (such as the Norwegian king) on both sides. One way of looking at the action is to say that it is about the enforced anglicization of Scotland, which Macbeth is resisting.

Shakespeare knows some of this. In Holinshed, Macbeth not only has a claim to the throne, he also has a legitimate grievance against Duncan. Moreover, in Shakespeare's source, Banquo is fully Macbeth's accomplice, and the murder of Duncan has a good deal of political justification. All this would be very touchy for Shakespeare, because Banquo is King James's ancestor, and if Duncan is a saint, then Banquo is a real problem, the ancestor one wants to forget. Shakespeare's way of handling Banquo fudges a lot of issues. Should he not, as a loyal thane, be pressing the claim of Malcolm, the designated heir, after the murder? Should he remain loyal to Macbeth as long as he does? In fact, this is precisely the sort of question that shows how close the play is to *Hamlet*: in both plays, the issue of legitimacy remains crucially ambiguous. Nobody in *Macbeth* presses the claim of Malcolm until Malcolm reappears with an army to support him, anymore than anyone in *Hamlet* presses the claim of Hamlet. In both plays, there is deep uncertainty about the relation between power and legitimacy—about whether legitimacy constitutes anything more than the rhetoric of power backed by the size of its army.

The issue of legitimacy provides, in fact, a powerful tragic impetus in the play. Duncan tries to legitimize his son Malcolm's succession by creating him Prince of Cumberland, thus declaring him their to the throne. Macbeth is surprised at this, for good reasons: Prince of Cumberland is a title designed on the analogy of the Prince of Wales; but this is not the way the succession works in Scotland. Cumberland is an *English* county,
which was briefly ceded to the Scottish crown, and Malcolm's new title is the thin edge of the English invasion—a Jacobean audience would have had deeply divided loyalties at this point in the play. James I himself became king of England not because he was the legitimate heir (he was one of a number of people with a distant claim to the throne), but because he was designated the successor by Queen Elizabeth; or at least several attendants at her death claimed that he was, and the people in control supported him. This is much closer to the situation in Hamlet and Macbeth than it is to any system of hereditary succession. And Macbeth is, even in the play, a fully legitimate king, as legitimate as Duncan: like Hamlet's Denmark, Scotland is not a hereditary monarchy; Macbeth is elected king by the thanes, and duly anointed. The fact that he turns out to be a bad king does not make him any less the king, anymore than the rebellion that opens the play casts doubt on Duncan's right to the throne.

Let us return to the witches' royal entertainment, with its songs and dances from Middleton. The Witch was written between 1610 and 1615; so by that time there was felt to be a need for more variety in the play, of a specifically theatrical kind, singing and dancing. I have suggested that witchcraft was good theatrical capital, but this does not really account for the revisions. Witchcraft was good theater no matter what the witches did—spells, incantations, visions, appearances and disappearances, diabolical music were their stock in trade. It would not have been at all necessary to transform them into the vaudevillians they become for Macbeth's entertainment. If variety was required, Duncan's hosts could have entertained him at dinner as the King of Navarre in Love's Labor's Lost entertains the Princess of France, with dances and a disguising; or Banquo's ghost, like Puck in A Midsummer Night's Dream, or Hamlet, could have interrupted a play within the play; or like Prospero in The Tempest, Duncan could have presented a royal masque to celebrate his son's investiture as Prince of Cumberland. Why bring the witches into it? But, to judge from the play's stage history, the vaudevillian witches constituted a stroke of theatrical genius.

Or did they? Consider the play's stage history. How successful, in fact, was Macbeth in its own time? Though it seems inconceivable that King James would not have been interested in the play, there is, as I have said, no record of a court performance—nor is there, indeed, any record of any pre-Restoration performance other than the one Simon Forman saw at the Globe in 1611, and reported in his diary. The Shakespeare Allusion Book records only seven other references to the play before 1649; of these, only three, all before 1611, seem to me allusions to performances. A fourth, from 1642, is quoting it as a classic text. The remaining examples merely refer to the historical figure of Macbeth. This, it must be emphasized, is a very small number of allusions: for comparison, there are fifty-eight to Hamlet, thirty-six to Romeo and Juliet, twenty-nine to the Henry IV plays, twenty-three to Richard III, nineteen to Othello.

This is all we know of the stage history of the play up to the Restoration. So perhaps reinventing the witches was not a stroke of theatrical genius after all; perhaps all it did was undertake, with uncertain success, to liven up an unpopular play. When Davenant revised Macbeth for the new stage, he inserted the whole of the singing and dancing scenes from Middleton—this, as I have indicated, was at least arguably how the play had been performed on the public stage for two decades or more before the closing of the theaters in 1642, and it would thus have been this version of the play that Davenant saw throughout his youth. (Davenant was born in 1606, so he was going to theater in the 1620s and '30s). Indeed, since The Witch remained unpublished until 1778, it is likely that Davenant took his text not from Middleton at all, but directly from the King's Men's performing text of Macbeth. Pepys provides a good testimony to the success of these and Davenant's other additions (Pepys's response is discussed in more detail in “Shakespeare and the Kinds of Drama”). Between 1664 and 1669 he went to the play nine times. The first time he found it only ‘a pretty good play, but admirably acted’—the admirable Macbeth was Betterton, soon to be the most famous actor of the age, at the outset of his career. What Pepys saw on this occasion was certainly the folio text, with its Middleton additions. Thereafter he saw the play as Davenant refurbished it, and his response changed dramatically. It was, at various times, ‘a most excellent play for variety’; ‘a most excellent play in all respects, but especially in divertisement, though it be a deep tragedy; which is a strange perfection in a tragedy, it being most proper here and suitable’; and finally, ‘one of the best plays for a stage, and a variety of dancing and music, that I ever saw.’
The interesting point here is the relation between ‘deep tragedy’ and ‘divertisement,’ which clearly for Pepys is a critical one. It is what he likes best about the play—indeed, it is what makes him revise his opinion of the play from ‘pretty good’ to ‘most excellent.’ And what Davenant added to the play—songs, dances, spectacle—is not simply something to appeal to Restoration taste. He expanded and elaborated elements that were already being added even before the folio text was published in 1623. So that is something to pause over: the really striking theatricality of the tragedy, its emphasis not just on visions and hallucinations, but on spectacle of all kinds, and even overtly—in scenes like the witches’ dances—on entertainment, and its move toward the court masque. We see Macbeth as the most intensely inward of Shakespeare’s plays, in which much of the action seems to take place within Macbeth’s head, or as a projection of his fears and fantasies. But if we look again at the text we have, and fill in the blanks, we see that, as far back as our evidence goes, a great deal of the play's character was always determined by what Pepys called ‘variety’ and ‘divertisement.’ Perhaps for early audiences, then, these elements were not antithetical to psychological depth after all. In this respect Macbeth resembles The Tempest more than it does the other tragedies.

The play's ‘divertisement’ is a quality that is largely lost to us, partly because it is only hinted at in the folio text, which merely indicates that the songs are to be sung, but does not print them, and partly because it is so difficult to imagine doing the full-scale grotesque ballet they imply in a modern production. Pepys thought divertisement should have seemed radically indecorous too; but, to his surprise, he did not find it so. What is the relation between tragedy and the antic quality of the witches? Why does that antic quality keep increasing in size and importance in the stage history of the play from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century? Addison, for example, recalls his attention being distracted at a Betterton performance by a woman loudly asking ‘When will the dear witches enter?’. Garrick, despite his claim to have returned to the text as originally written by Shakespeare, kept all Davenant's witch scenes; and in 1793, when Mrs Siddons was the Lady Macbeth, Hecate and her spirits descended and ascended on clouds, and the cauldron scene constituted a long interpolated pantomime. Clearly Mrs Siddons did not think she was being upstaged. Can we imagine similar elements playing a similarly crucial role in the stage history of Lear or Hamlet? In fact, we can: in Lear, if it is the antic quality we are concerned with, there are Lear's mad scenes and the fool's zany speeches, which we find so hard to understand and pare down to a minimum, but which must have been popular in Shakespeare's time because new ones were added between the 1608 quarto and the 1623 folio. As for Hamlet, perhaps the witches externalize that anarchic quality that makes the prince so dangerous an adversary to the guilty king.

Suppose we try to imagine a Hamlet written from Claudius's point of view, in the way Macbeth is written from Macbeth's. Look at it this way: the murder Claudius commits is the perfect crime; but the hero-villain quickly finds that his actions have unimagined implications, and that the world of politics is not all he has to contend with. Even as it stands, Hamlet is a very political play, and does not really need the ghost at all: Hamlet has his suspicions already; Claudius tries to buy him off by promising him the succession, but this is not good enough. It turns out that the problem is not really conscience or revenge, it is Hamlet's own ambitions—he wanted to succeed his father on the throne; Claudius, Hamlet says, ‘Lept in between the election and my hopes.’ The ghost is really, literally, a deus ex machina. But in a Hamlet that did not center on Hamlet, Claudius's guilty conscience, which is not much in evidence in the play, would have a great deal more work to do. So would the ghost—who should, after all, logically be haunting Claudius, not Hamlet. This play would be not about politics but about how the dead do not disappear, they return to embody our crimes, so that we have to keep repeating them—just like Macbeth. In this version of Hamlet, Hamlet is hardly necessary, any more than in Macbeth, Malcolm and Macduff are necessary—the drama of Macbeth is really a matter between Macbeth and his ambition, Macbeth and the witches and his wife and his hallucinations and his own tortured soul, the drama of prophecies and riddles, and how he understands them, and what he decides to do about them, and how they, in themselves, constitute retribution.

What, then, about the riddles, those verbal incarnations of the imperfect speakers the witches? Macbeth is told that he will never be conquered till Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane; and that no man of woman born will
harm him. Are these paradoxical impossibilities realized? Not at all, really: the Birnam Wood prophecy does not come true, it just appears to Macbeth that it does—the wood is not moving, it merely looks as if it is. Or alternatively, we could say that ‘Birnam Wood’ is a quibble: Macbeth assumes it means the forest, but it could mean merely wood from the forest, the branches the soldiers are using for camouflage—it comes true merely as a stage device. As for ‘no man of woman born,’ maybe the problem is that Macbeth is not a close enough reader: he takes the operative word to be ‘woman,’—‘No man of woman born shall harm Macbeth’—but the key word turns out to be ‘born’—‘No man of woman born shall harm Macbeth.’ If this is right, we must go on to consider the implications of the assumption that a Caesarian section does not constitute birth. This is really, historically, quite significant: a vaginal birth would have been handled by women, the midwife, maids, attendants, with no men present. But surgery was a male prerogative—the surgeon was always a man; midwives were not allowed to use surgical instruments—and the surgical birth thus means, in Renaissance terms, that Macduff was brought to life by men, not women: carried by a woman, but made viable only through masculine intervention. Such a birth, all but invariably, involved the mother's death.

Macbeth himself sees it this way, when he defies Macduff and says,

> Though Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane,
> And thou opposed, being of no woman born ...,

(5.8.30-1)

where logically it should be ‘being not of woman born’: the key concept is not ‘no woman,’ but ‘not born.’ But Shakespeare seems to be conceiving of a masculine equivalent to the immaculate conception, a birth uncontaminated by women, as the Virgin's was uncontaminated by man.

So this riddle bears on the whole issue of the place of women in the play's world, how very disruptive they seem to be, even when, like Lady Macduff, they are loving and nurturing. Why is it so important, for example, at the end of the play, that Malcolm is a virgin? Malcolm insists to Macduff that he is utterly pure, ‘yet / Unknown to woman’ (4.3.125-6), uncontaminated by heterosexuality—this is offered as the first of his qualifications for displacing and succeeding Macbeth. Perhaps this bears too on the really big unanswered question about Macduff: why he left his family unprotected when he went to seek Malcolm in England—this is what makes Malcolm mistrust him so deeply. Why would you leave your wife and children unprotected, to face the tyrant's rage, unless you knew they were really in no danger?

But somehow the question goes unanswered, does not need to be answered, perhaps because Lady Macduff in some unspoken way is the problem, just as, more obviously, Lady Macbeth and the witches are. Those claims on Macduff that tie him to his wife and children, that would keep him at home, that purport to be higher than the claims of masculine solidarity, are in fact rejected quite decisively by the play. In Holinshed, Macduff flees only after his wife and children have been murdered, and therefore for the best of reasons. Macduff's desertion of his family is Shakespeare's addition to the story. Maybe, the play keeps saying, if it weren't for all those women ... ? It really is an astonishingly male-oriented and misogynistic play, especially at the end, when there are simply no women left, not even the witches, and the restored commonwealth is a world of heroic soldiers. Is the answer to Malcolm's question about why Macduff left his family, ‘Because it's you I really love’?

So, to return to the increasingly elaborate witches' scenes, the first thing they do for this claustrophobic play is to open up a space for women—a subversive and paradoxical space. This is a play in which paradoxes abound, and for Shakespeare's audience, Lady Macbeth would have embodied those paradoxes as powerfully as the witches do: in her proclaimed ability to ‘unsex’ herself, in her willingness to dash her own infant's brains out, but most of all, in the kind of control she exercises over her husband. The marriage at the center of the play is one of the scariest things about it, but it is worth observing that, as Shakespearean marriages go,
this is a good one: intense, intimate, loving. The notion that your wife is your friend and your comfort is not a Shakespearean one. The relaxed, easygoing, happy time men and women have together in Shakespeare all takes place before marriage, as part of the wooing process—this is the subject of comedy. What happens after marriage is the subject of tragedy—Goneril and Regan are only extreme versions of perfectly normative Shakespearean wives. The only Shakespearean marriage of any duration that is represented as specifically sexually happy is the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude, a murderer and an adulteress; and it is probably to the point that even they stop sleeping together after only four months—not, to be sure, by choice.

In this context, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are really quite well matched. They care for each other and understand each other deeply, exhibiting a genuine intimacy and trust of a sort one does not find, for example, in the marriage of the Capulets, or in Iago and Emilia (to say nothing of Othello and Desdemona), or in Coriolanus and Virgilia, or in Cymbeline and his villainous queen (who is not even provided with a name), or in Leontes and Hermione. As I have suggested in “Prospero's Wife,” the prospects for life after marriage in Shakespeare really are pretty grim. And in this respect, probably the most frightening thing in the play is the genuine power of Lady Macbeth's mind—not just her powers of analysis and persuasion, but her intimate apprehension of her husband's deepest desires, her perfect understanding of what combination of arguments will prove irresistible to the masculine ego: 'Be a man,' and 'If you really loved me you’d do it.'

But can the play's action really be accounted for simply by the addition of yet another witch? Macbeth's marriage is a version of the Adam and Eve story, the woman persuading the man to commit the primal sin against the father. But the case is loaded: surely Lady Macbeth is not the culprit, anymore than Eve is—or than the witches are. What she does is give voice to Macbeth's inner life, release in him the same forbidden desire that the witches have called forth. To act on this desire is what it means in the play to be a man. But having evoked her husband's murderous ambition, having dared him to stop being a child, she suddenly finds that when he is a man she is powerless. Her own power was only her power over the child, the child she was willing to destroy to gain the power of a man.

Davenant, redoing the play, does some really interesting thinking about such issues. His version has had a bad press from critics since the nineteenth century, but like all his adaptations, it starts from a shrewd sense not merely of theatrical realities, but of genuine critical problems with the play—problems of the sort that editors and commentators lavish minute attention on, but directors and performers simply gloss over or cut. Many of his changes have to do with elucidation, clarifying obscurities in Shakespeare's text, especially in the opening scenes. There is also a move toward theatrical efficiency in casting. In the opening, for example, Macduff becomes Lennox, Seyton becomes the Captain—it is difficult to see why these are not improvements. Davenant also worries a lot, to our minds unnecessarily, about the location of scenes and the topography of the action, matters Shakespeare is resolutely vague about. Thus when Lady Macduff fears that she is lost, her servant is able to reassure her that ‘this is the entrance o' the heath’ (2.5.3)—do heaths even have entrances? Such moments are the price of adapting the play to a stage where topography is realized and location materialized in scenery.

The most interesting aspects of the revision involve the women. It has often been observed that since the Restoration theater employed actresses, it made sense to increase the women's parts; but this is hardly adequate to account for Davenant's additions: for one thing, the witches continued to be played by men. It is the moral dimension of the woman's role that Davenant rethinks. Thus in a domestic scene that has no parallel in the folio, Lady Macduff sharply questions Macduff's motives, accusing him of ambition: ‘I am afraid you have some other end / Than meerely ScottLand's freedom to defend’ (3.2.18-9)—doesn't he really want the throne himself? Lady Macduff here articulates the same critique of her husband that, in Shakespeare, Hecate does of Macbeth: that he is out for himself alone. Her fear articulates that perennial problem in the play, Malcolm's question about Macduff that never gets answered—where are your real loyalties; why is coming to England to join my army more important than the lives of your wife and children? The problem remains in Davenant, but is mitigated by the fact that Lady Macduff encourages Macduff to flee after the murder of
Banquo. If it was a mistake, it was her mistake as well as his. Davenant's Lady Macduff also expresses a conservative royalist line, insisting that the only thing that can justify Macduff's rebellion will be for him to place the true heir, Malcolm, on the throne, rather than claiming it himself—the women, for Davenant, consistently articulate the moral position. Even Lady Macbeth, in a scene of love and recrimination inserted before the sleepwalking scene, accuses Macbeth of being like Adam, following her when he should have led her. But just as Davenant's women are more important, they are also less dangerous: the Restoration Malcolm does not claim to be a virgin.

Revisers and performers have never been happy with the way Lady Macbeth simply fades out, and Macbeth is perfunctorily killed. The play does not even provide its hero with a final speech, let alone a eulogy for Shakespeare's most complex and brilliant studies in villainy. Malcolm dismisses the pair succinctly as ‘this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen.’ Davenant added a rather awkward dying line for Macbeth (‘Farewell vain world, and what's most vain in it, ambition,’ 5.7.83), and tastefully resolved the problem of Macbeth's double death by leaving the body on stage and having Macduff re-enter with Macbeth's sword, instead of his head. By the mid-eighteenth century, Garrick—who was claiming to be performing the play ‘as written by Shakespeare’—had inserted an extended death speech for the hero:

'Tis done! The scene of life will quickly close.  
Ambition's vain, delusive dreams are fled,  
And now I wake to darkness, guilt and horror;  
I cannot bear it! Let me shake it off—  
'Twill not be; my soul is clogged with blood—  
I cannot rise! I dare not ask for mercy—  
It is too late, hell drags me down; I sink,  
I sink—Oh!—my soul is lost forever!  
Oh!

This Faustian peroration went on being used until well into the nineteenth century.

The editors of Bell's Shakespeare in 1774 declared themselves pleased with the play's ending, observing, with characteristic condescension, that Shakespeare, ‘contrary to his common practice, … has wound up the plot, punished the guilty, and established the innocent, in such a regular progression of important events, that nothing was wanting but very slight alterations. …’9 But there is a puzzling element in Shakespeare's conclusion, which is less symmetrical and more open-ended than this suggests. Why, in a play so clearly organized around ideas of good and evil, is it not Malcolm who defeats Macbeth—the incarnation of virtue, the man who has never told a lie or slept with a woman, overcoming the monster of vice? In fact, historically, this is what happened: Macbeth was killed in battle by Malcolm, not Macduff. Shakespeare is following Holinshed here, but why, especially in a play that revises so much else in its source material? Davenant recognizes this as a problem, and, followed by Garrick, gives Macduff a few lines of justification as he kills Macbeth: ‘This for thy Royall Master Duncan / This for my Dearest freind my wife, / This for those pledges of our Loves; my Children / … Ile as a Trophy bear away his sword / To witness my revenge’ (5.7.76-82). The addition is significant, and revealing: in Shakespeare, Macduff, fulfilling the prophecy, is simply acting as Malcolm's agent, the man not born of woman acting for the king uncontaminated by women. But why does virtue need an agent, while vice can act for itself? And what about the agent: does the unanswered question about Macduff abandoning his family not linger in the back of our minds? Does his willingness to condone the vices Malcolm invents for himself not say something disturbing about the quality of Macduff as a hero? Is he not, in fact, the pragmatic soldier who does what needs to be done so that the saintly king can stay clear of the complexities and paradoxes of politics and war? Davenant does not quite succeed in disarming the ambiguities of the ending. What happens next, with a saintly king of Scotland, and an ambitious soldier as his right hand man, and those threatening offspring the heirs of Banquo still waiting in the wings?

Notes
1. The assumption is that the inclusion of the Middleton material dates from the revision printed in the folio. The complete text of the songs is printed in the Oxford, Norton and New Pelican editions of Macbeth.

2. Quotations are from my edition of the play in the New Pelican Shakespeare.


5. The book tabulates seven allusions, but in fact includes eight. The Knight of the Burning Pestle and a play called The Puritan refer pretty clearly to Banquo's ghost, and The Two Maids of Mortlake, a parodic play by Robert Armin, the principal clown in Shakespeare's company, recalls Macbeth's “Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hands?” Since Armin's play was published in 1609, this must be a recollection of Macbeth on the stage. Sir Thomas Browne in 1642 saying that he begins “to be weary of the sun” is more likely a recollection of the printed text.


Critic: Character Studies: H. W. Fawkner (essay date 1990)


[In the following essay, Fawkner maintains that absence is the central structural theme of Macbeth and analyzes the protagonist as a character who remains distanced from his actions.]

3.1 THE ASSASSINATION OF INTENTIONALITY

As I now approach the dramatic crisis of murder itself, my criticism will situate itself inside what is loosely known as the “noble-murderer interpretation.” This is the reading favored by actors like Garrick and Olivier and discussed by quite a number of significant critics. The basic idea, here, is that Shakespeare's genius does not bother to stage the banal notion of a bad man entering evil but of a very good man entering evil. However, and this is a crucial dimension of the current enterprise, I do not myself read this transition (in the noble-murderer reading) from good to evil as a “fall” from good, as a common type of tragic “tainting.” I do not think that Macbeth at any point “becomes evil” in order to become a murderer (although murder in itself obviously is evil). I think, with John Bayley, that it “is essential to the hypnotic tension of the play that Macbeth should not seem in any ordinary way ‘responsible’ for his actions.”1 (The stress here is on “ordinary”; one is not freeing Macbeth from responsibility.) In short, my position is this: anyone arguing that Macbeth “turns evil” and that this inner darkening is the crucial trigger device for the murder and the tragic action is not only misconceiving Shakespeare's dramatic design but also disfiguring the imaginative and aesthetic potentials of the play.

In fact, that type of secondary-school reading also disfigures most of the enormous psychological potentials of Macbeth. Several critics are generously willing to acknowledge the greatness of the play, while at the same time voicing the curious prejudice that Shakespeare is a poor psychologist who sacrifices psychological truth for the sake of dramatic effect. One is willing to recognize the feeling of tragic greatness, but finding that this
greatness does not fit any logocentric model of psychological causation, one decides that the play is successful in spite of its psychology. I hold precisely the opposite view. I think there is a very special psychology in this play, and I think that critics replacing this psychology (which is beyond their ken) with their own “temptation-and-fall” theories (taken from popular logic) are simply transforming the play into something that is more immediately manageable for them than it really is. E. E. Stoll has argued that the tragic thrill comes from seeing the good man falling into horror, but that Macbeth's deeds would be more in keeping with psychological realism had the hero had some real cause to dislike Duncan. This, to me, is the silliest possible notion. If Macbeth really has had a grievance, then the whole play called Macbeth, far from being one of the most brilliant dramas ever devised, would sink into mediocrity and indifference. In this same vein and fashion, Gustav Rümelin tells us that Shakespeare “exaggerates” at the expense of real “psychological truth” but still somehow creates a play that is his most powerful and mighty tragedy. In his review of these two positions, J. I. M. Stewart limply follows suit (with respect to this particular issue) by stating that Shakespeare was always prepared to use a “non-realistic” move and that tragic fall might be related to the fact that “everybody” is subject to weak moments of exposure in which some “lurking” evil runs through us.

The idea that Macbeth is “treacherous” (in the ordinary sense) is no doubt prompted by his tendency, shown from the outset, to speak in asides. The “Cumberland” aside (1.4.48-53) is a case in point here: “Stars, hide your fires! / Let not light see my black and deep desires.” But two things need to be said about the incriminating asides. First, the “Cumberland” aside, as the only really “evil” one, is almost certainly an interpolation—as Granville-Barker, Fleay, and others have observed (KM, 25). I suspect that this interpolation was introduced by someone with precisely the kind of attitude exemplified by Stoll and Rümelin above: that Shakespearean psychology had to be “improved” (indeed introduced!) so that tragic intentionality could be “made clear.” Second, the hero's tendency to speak in asides is not necessarily a social event, denoting undercover action and withdrawal, but a technical necessity: Shakespeare wants to display a transition toward introversion, and the only way of giving the audience access to this introversion is to use asides and soliloquies.

My own view is this: that Macbeth never has had the intention to murder Duncan, and that throughout the play he never has any such intention. His intention is not only absent, it is structurally absent.

Absence, generally, is structural in Macbeth; and absent intentionality is the specific form that tragic crisis gives to this general absence. I cannot really see how the play as a whole can function in its specifically Shakespearean form of suggestion without there being a (conscious or unconscious) recognition of this peculiar organization.

In a sense—and this is what is truly terrifying in Macbeth—there is simply nothing of the murderer in the hero. Partly, this murderous emptiness inside the murderer can be explained in terms of constitutional weakness; one can posit a failure of nerve, of proper disposition, or even (as we have seen in Bayley's criticism) of dramatic suitability: the hero's mind is “unfitted for the role that tragedy requires of it.” But things can be taken much further—in a sense logically have to be taken much further. The murderous emptiness is not only the function of “weakness” but a function of strength—of an intensity of mind that is unprecedented. Tragic paralysis, in Macbeth, is not a merely passive event; on the contrary, it is highly active. Tragic action, while being interiorized so as to mostly take place inside the mind, does not dissipate its energies there, become mere misty sluggishness. Macbeth wrestles with a spell, and in a sense with a paralyzing one; but the paralysis affects his bodily actions and military readiness, not his mind. The spell, far from being something that drugs his intellect, is something that keenly awakens it to unprecedented acuteness and sensitivity. What this extra-lucid intellection now comes to engage with (as I shall argue in a moment) is the activity of an unthinkable watchfulness: Macbeth begins the weird process of watching the absence of his own intention (to murder).
Because of this Shakespearean move, the scene presencing the hallucinated dagger cannot (as Olivier and others recognized) be turned into a conventional horror scene, full of mere knee-knocking and guilt. In Olivier's performance, there was no melodramatic recoiling from the air-drawn dagger, and the soliloquy was spoken as if in dreaming. Delivering his speech as drugged whisper, Olivier managed to create a sense of total unreality. Although Macbeth appeared as a man of immense sensibility, this sensibility did not sensitize him to the murder itself but made him rather indifferent to it (indifferent to its presence). Sensibility was now directed toward something else. His comments after returning from the king's chamber were delivered in a strangely flat tone, signifying a lack of real self-involvement. It might be argued here that Macbeth is not actually interested in murder but in the aura of absences around it, that he is not hypnotized by murder as action but by the ever-receding (non)supports in which it is embedded. Macbeth's intellect is from this viewpoint a deepening of a process identified by Margaret Ferguson in Hamlet: the hero's tendency to be attentive to the passive rather than the active: “Hamlet does not inquire very deeply … into the meaning of his action [when killing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, etc.]. This seems odd, since he has shown himself so remarkably capable of interrogating the meaning of his inaction.” In spite of the larger inclination toward action of Macbeth, the remark remains relevant for him too—for as I will be continuing to argue, action for him tends to presence itself in terms of inaction. This fact applies to all the temporal phases: past action, present action, and future action. Thus the “dialectic” between action and inaction as it surfaces in Hamlet is here taken down into a deeper state of reciprocation, for here one side of the dialectic is often sensed to actually amount to its polar opposite.

The idea of Macbeth as one immersed in “ambition” seems to me to be a red herring in this general context. We are told that he is exceedingly ambitious—so ambitious, in fact, that he is prepared to commit a terrible crime against a sovereign who is politically innocent and not even an ordinary “political enemy.” But while Lady Macbeth is the ambitious one, and the one trying to persuade her husband that he is her equal in this respect, Macbeth hardly ever displays political behavior that betokens ambitious thoughts. The end of the “If it were done” soliloquy is interesting from this viewpoint:

To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th'other—

(1.7.25-29)

From the orthodox perspective the meaning is that ambition is pure cause, the only cause. There is a circle of ambition, so that ambition itself causes ambition. But if ambition is circular and solipsistic in this sense, the circularity (“Vaulting”) surely refers to effect rather than cause. Ambition is circular as effect. In Macbeth there are in a sense only effects (as I shall presently argue). The ambition is “vaulting” and circular because it has no punctual source or origin; it does not originate from any empirical fact, whether of treacherous mind or political actuality. The “ambition” is ultimately empty of substance, of empirical content; and for this very reason it is nonambition. Macbeth does not say that he has “only ambition”—or only an ambition that, sadly, happens to be vaulting. He says that he only has vaulting ambition. It does not overleap its target (since it has none), it “o'erleaps itself.” It traces only the formal presence of its formal possibility. It “falls on th'other—” … what? Side? In any case it falls on something else, on something beyond itself, on something that has nothing to do with ambition.

I would now like to forward the first of the three main critical notions in this subsection. This is the notion that the idea of the murder is stronger for Macbeth than the murder, and that he therefore in a strange way has to perform the murder in order to murder the idea of it.

This line of reasoning presupposes certain assumptions similar to those made by John Bayley. “Macbeth may
seem simple enough, but it is also in fact the play with the clearest and most terrifying discrepancy between inner consciousness and action.\textsuperscript{10} This fracturing of the spirit, leading to extreme inwardization, is what I have been identifying as “metaphysical servitude”. In fact Bayley at one point happens to use this very word ("servitude") in a similar fashion: Shakespeare shows us social chaos but he also shows us chaos in the mind, "its nightmare servitude to an irrevocable act."\textsuperscript{11} My commentary would only add this single qualification: that it is not to the act that Macbeth ultimately is the slave, but to the idea of it. This difference may seem slender, “academic.” But in fact the whole drama pivots on it—and it is by ignoring this very difference that criticisms tend to prematurely wreck their logic. It is clear that if the “servitude” of the tragic hero is a servitude to the idea rather than to the actual act as such, the servitude can precede the act and thus in a sense come to be viewed as causal.

There are two main ways of explaining the crucial difference between a murder/idea nexus where murder is dominant and a murder/idea nexus where idea is dominant, and I begin with a procedure that discusses this particular notion in relation to the cardinal concept of the entire play: Truth.

Those favoring the theory of ambition will no doubt point to units such as: “Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor: / The greatest is behind” (1.3.116-17) and “Two truths are told, / As happy prologues to the swelling act / Of the imperial theme” (1.3.127-29). The first of these units appears to indicate that Macbeth is now ambitiously looking forward to the remaining third of his monarchial career; but while I can agree with the fact that he certainly is looking forward, I cannot agree with the idea that he is looking forward mainly in terms of ambition. The forward-looking is engineered logically, not emotionally. If a gypsy looks in a crystal ball and tells me I win eight hundred dollars next Wednesday at seven o’clock, and that I win eight million dollars the following Wednesday at seven o’clock, then it is not particularly surprising that I will be looking forward with a thumping heart to that second Wednesday evening if the first Wednesday evening to my surprise brings me in exactly eight hundred dollars and exactly at seven o’clock. But what does this new thrill depend on? It depends exclusively on my quite normal ability to perform cognitive acts of simple induction. This is precisely the mechanism that Shakespeare is working with in Macbeth: and the brilliant point about it all is that subjectivity as causal agent in an important way can be bracketed. My hopes, just like those of Macbeth for the crown, are in a sense not monitored by a subjective act of will. Although we have come to desire the promised thing, the “approach” of that thing, its coming into the horizon of our ownmost view, its closeness, is not a function of desire. Instead a rather abstract and lofty mechanism of logic out there in the world has presented these bewildering hopes; they are, as such, beyond my control and influence. Indeed, there can only come into action the sense of a really self-determined subjective mastery through a negation of the hopes: only by resisting them can I gain back the initiative that right now has slipped away into chance, weird predestination, or whatever you want to call it. “Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor: / The greatest is behind.” If the lines are spoken with the gluttony of poorly concealed expectation, then Macbeth, I admit, is already implicitly a murderer and a villain, a new Richard III. But I do not think the lines should be spoken with the dark glow of intense ambition radiating from the eyes, and I do not think that Macbeth in any significant way recapitulates Richard III. The words might better be spoken in stunned, mechanical, incredulous reverie.

The idea of the “happy prologues” does not really endanger this reading, for “happy” does not necessarily at all refer to an emotion (a growing happiness inside the cogito “Macbeth”) but, indeed, to “prologues.” It is not happiness (as a subjective state of mind) that is at stake here, but the idea of happiness; and this idea is an ideal: happiness as the completion of the perfectly drawn metaphysical circle Glamis-Cawdor-King. The happiness lies most of all in the completion of the circle, in the happy presence to itself of the circle’s possible realization. The “prologues” are happy because their identities as prologues are quickly being enhanced by the general turn of events.

The second way of discussing the ascendency of “idea of murder” over “murder” is to call attention to certain psychological states involving delinealized temporality and reversed causation. Macbeth, we know, suffers right from the first encounter with the sisters from a “fit”—call it a “murder fit.” But this fit is not an emotion
or passion in which he suddenly, like Mr. Hyde, realizes that he wants to murder; instead the fit is a state where he realizes that his identity-as-murderer is already formed “out there” in logical space. The entity Macbeth-as-murderer “exists,” immediately, as a ready-made thing out there. It is premature and trivial to call this thing an “idea” or a “thought”—because Shakespeare is perhaps in the final analysis shaking our confidence in being able to state what an idea or a thought is. What is a thought? What is an idea? These questions do not simply follow the Macbeth-problematic as “interesting points” to be made about a finished dramatic experience; rather, these questions are internal to the dramatic experience as such—not as questions, but as movements charged with questioning possibility.

The “fit” that seizes Macbeth can be compared with the one that seizes many people who come to a precipice. What is interesting here is the mechanism of “original reaction” or “originary fear.” It is related to what I discussed a while ago as “originary healing.” The psychological mechanism only appears in humans, though certain higher apes have similar tendencies. In this type of experience, there is not first a perception of the abyss, then a fear of it, and then a readiness to jump off—in order, as it were, to cancel the horrible swelling of the fear. Instead there is from the outset a sense of vertigo: the very first perception of the abyss is the perception of one's horrible fate at its bottom. That, precisely, is what the abyss is all about: that all along it has been waiting for you there; or, to make things more gruesome and Shakespearean: that all along you have been waiting down there. “You.” A corpse. The fallen you waits for you, just as in our play the fallen Macbeth (who already has murdered Duncan) “waits” for the not-fallen Macbeth. In a sense greets him, quite solemnly. “Hail Macbeth!” The existence of specters in such a world does not at all surprise one from this viewpoint: corpses, rising from the abyss; an absolute beyond speaking from inside the bosom of one's tightest self-presence.

This mechanism can be theorized in minute detail with reference to the hero's system of reflexes. Macbeth does not first feel that he might eventually want to murder Duncan and then see the bloody scenario in front of him and finally find himself in full flight from the feeling/thought/image. This reassuring sequentiality is what afflicts Mr. Smith in the common horror story; but Macbeth is not Mr. Smith and Shakespeare is not “into” horror stories. What happens to Macbeth, instead, is that he begins with the horror/flight. He begins not with the flight from something, but just with “from”: the flight-from. He does not begin with the horror of something, but just with “of”: horror-of. Gradually he has to “fill in” the missing object, make it present and self-present.

My thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man,
That function is smother'd in surmise,
And nothing is, but what is not.

(1.3.139-43)

Here, it is not only that the consequences of murder have not yet been fully grasped; murder is not “fantastical” merely because it is unreal and unfamiliar as a fully developed notion. The unit “fantastical” instead indicates that murder at this point refuses to be, precisely, “a fully developed notion.” Thought, still, has not formed the idea “murder,” and conversely “murder” is not yet part of thought but part of what is “fantastical.” “Murder,” from this viewpoint is weird (“fantastical”), and the important word sequence “thought, whose murther” (which hits the spectator as word sequence, not idea) indicates that thought itself is drawn into the dangers, risks, and unrealities of “murder,” that “thought” and “murder” are coimplicative—but in a way that cannot yet (or perhaps ever) be understood.

The idea I am trying to promote, here, is that repulsion in a difficult sense is primal and originary in Macbeth; repulsion is “causal” as it is in cases of deathward anguish near the precipice. Because one is so frightfully repelled by the horrible abyss, one is sucked down into it. Analogously: because noble Macbeth is so
frightfully repelled by the idea of murder, he is drawn relentlessly into it.

The important soliloquies of the opening act are all structured by this primacy of repulsion. Thus Shakespeare does not make us feel that Macbeth is a pulsional man, full of the blood-hot passion of murderous desire, and that metaphysical deliberation is some kind of hesitant latecomer, some mere process of deferral. Instead Shakespeare makes us feel that repulsion “organizes” pulsion, that the repulsive reflex is so dominant and intense that whatever eventually gets done in the name of its opposite (in the name of murder) really in a fundamental way is structured, determined, and limited by that original and irremovable repulsionism.

This queer organization can be felt in the important “If it were done” soliloquy. Here, already, and under the influence of Lady Macbeth's manipulations, the hero is beginning to try to think out his revulsion in terms of its opposite: “real” desire to murder. But precisely because revulsion still plays the leading part—the part it remains playing for the duration of the tragedy—the soliloquy does not take Macbeth where “he”/murder would have liked it to go.

3.2 SOLILOQUY

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if th'assassination
Could trammel up the consequence …

(1.7.1-3)

There is pragmatic calculation here, a man prepared to overlook transcendental issues (“jump the life to come,” 1.7.7) in order to carefully consider the worldly consequences of a mean deed. So goes the common reading. And it will be supported by critics like Bertrand Evans, theorists who argue that Macbeth has no moral awareness at all, and that this soliloquy reveals the shallowness of his moral capacities. We are told that Macbeth in no true way is raising moral objections to murder in this soliloquy, that his moral logic is lame and insufficient. I agree entirely. But for the opposite reasons. Why is this pro-and-con soliloquy empty of moral substance? Evans says it is because Macbeth lacks moral sensibility; I say that it is because Macbeth has moral sensibility. The moral debate is superfluous (and thus structurally empty for Macbeth as “dialectic” or inner tug-of-war) precisely because he has absolute insight into the immorality of the deed. If Evans's notion of Macbeth as a moral idiot were true, we would have no tragedy at all. In Shakespeare's complex organization of the tragic mechanism, the very murder requires an absolute recoil as a first trigger for its later effectuation. For Evans the hero's rhetoric only indicates that the murder is assessed as being “particularly risky,” and the unit “We'd jump the life to come” is identified as a “casual” pronouncement. Macbeth's feeling that the murder will be blown in every eye is said to refer to the villain's fear of punishment as a consequence of universal protest.

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if th'assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all—here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come.—But in these cases,
We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague th'inventor: this even-handed Justice
Commends th'ingredience of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips.

(1.7.1-12)
The trouble with distortions and simplifications of Macbeth's tragic mind is not only that the hero's subtle character gets ruined but also that we end up with a falsification and sentimentalization of the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Because Bertrand Evans thinks that Macbeth is a moral idiot, he also thinks that Lady Macbeth knows Macbeth in a very deep manner. Indeed, in their conjoint “understanding” of Macbeth as a moral idiot (and therefore also a pathetic coward) Evans and Lady Macbeth form a perfect pair. Their readings of the man Macbeth and of the particular nature of his inner predicament are equally acute. This “superlative wife,” we are informed, reads Macbeth like a “primer.” His expressed reluctance to proceed with the evil plan is the function of “lame” rationalization, a pathetically “whining” set of excuses. She only has to tell him the “plain truth” and show him how to avoid getting caught in order to demolish his dams of resistance.

Shakespeare, of course, is really doing something utterly different in this soliloquy. Murder is a completely monstrous thing for Macbeth, and the soliloquy ends up in the constatation that murder is out of the question. It may seem that this decision is a function of the foregrounding of all the nasty “consequences” of murder; yet as the end of the speech indicates, the final sensation has nothing to do with “consequences” but with the apprehension of a vast visionary nothingness in which the nullity of motivation and the nullity of desire are beginning to be indistinguishable.

Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And Pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's Cherubins, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.—I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th'other—

(1.7.18-28)

Although murder (and not merely its “consequences”) is prominently horrible for Macbeth in the soliloquy, he permits some distant part of his mind to mechanically go through what amounts to an elaborate hypothesis of murder: quite simply to clarify the absurdity of the deed's possibility. The academic silliness of taking various linguistic units at their surface value quickly emerges from a consideration of “We'd jump the life to come” as it appears at the beginning of the speech (1.7.7). Far from indicating a callous readiness to obliterate the transcendental horizon, this unit merely indicates the highly provisional suppression of that idealist notion. It is obvious that instead of being a worldly pragmatist caring only for mundane consequences the hero is in deep levels of his being profoundly conscious of the transcendental dilemma. Macbeth remains a transcendentally oriented figure throughout the play. And, what is more, all his moments of crisis are in the final analysis monitored and organized by his intense transcendentalism—the very transcendentalism that Shakespeare troubled to clarify in his opening scenes. Indeed, none of the hero's moments of tragic crisis are adequately grasped if they are not viewed in relation to the hero's sustained idealism. Although he starts, in this soliloquy, with a lower-than-divine sphere of reference (“here, / But here”), it is eminently clear that the latter parts of the speech reveal a very strong sense of divine infringement: “The deep damnation of his taking-off” (1.7.20). In his misreading, Evans fails to see that rhetoric overpowers “meaning.” If you look at the end of the soliloquy, with all its images of “heaven's Cherubins” and nakedly new-born Pity, it is easy to see that the generally moral and religious frame of reference is precisely what is most vivid and important in Macbeth's state of mind. Who, in this speech, is not in “deep damnation” if not Macbeth?

But if part of the soliloquy can be viewed as a function of the very moral inclination in Macbeth that certain critics refuse to acknowledge, another part is a function of a vaster mechanism that is still not fully developed.
but which can nevertheless be intuited at this early stage. This mechanism is perhaps best described as a form of staging. Macbeth begins a highly imaginative process of self-projection where the extravagance of image and sentiment at once flattens and deepens the sense of personal involvement. This involvement, now at one and the same time growing more shallow and more troubled, is an engagement with a “new” Macbeth, or a Macbeth on the “other side”—a person somehow possible at the farther side of “murder,” behind and beyond its reality. In this staging—theatrical in an almost melodramatic manner that will not fade in subsequent scenes—it is not merely the question of nonmurderous Macbeth learning how to project himself into the cold-bloodedness of murder; rather, it is the question of quite stable Macbeth learning how to become the absence-from-Macbeth that he already to some extent is on account of prophecy and on account of the weird “original guilt” promoted in the what-is-not soliloquy. The more absent Macbeth learns to become, the more does he become present to the self-absence that already is his odd destiny and tragedy. This process of increasingly melodramatic and forced staging can be related to Bayley's notion (discussed recently) that the hero is unfit to play his part in tragedy. Michael Goldman thinks along similar lines when he speaks of Macbeth “learning to perform” the murder, “as an actor might.” In psychoanalytic terms: the more one “plays” being “the murderer” (whether positively or negatively, whether “sincerely” or hypothetically), the less does one have to answer for murder personally. But the play's mechanism does not exactly parallel the Freudian notion that revulsion from murder secretly indicates murderous desire; here, rather, it is the other way around: desire, curiously enough, betokens revulsion, betokens what I have referred to as “originary revulsion” or “originary repulsion.”

Two main “levels” can thus be identified in the “If it were done” soliloquy—and both of them unbalance the “stage-villain” reading forwarding this great speech as a discourse on worldly obstacles. First there is the clear view of Macbeth as a morally conscious man—a view deliberately and elaborately staged by Shakespeare. Macbeth, searching his heart, finds that murder is not tolerable as a political deed or human act. But precisely because Macbeth is so obviously moral, precisely because he himself is so profoundly conscious of his own ingrained idealism, the “moral dimension” of his thought is almost automatized: he does not have to carefully think out the reasons for not murdering Duncan but instead merely has to call them into view. Indeed, we feel that part of his mind is absent from this cataloguing of moral considerations. As we have seen, there are critics who prematurely rationalize this slight absence in Macbeth from the moral issues as a “moral lack.” But the lack is not a moral lack but a lack. Just that, a vacuity and minus. Macbeth listens to himself go through a routine act of logical argumentation, but what interests him is the astonishing fact that he can at all deliberate such matters in a reasoning manner. As the sense of dreamy unreality intensifies, he can fuel the absence-oriented process by permitting his sense of slipping foothold to merge with the “deep damnation” in Duncan's “taking-off.” Macbeth actually himself takes off, joining those equally unreal creatures in the aerial corridors of sightless couriers and heavenly cherubim.

It is clear by now that the “If it were done” soliloquy simultaneously forwards the sense of two opposite movements—and that discourse, deconstructing the oppositionality of this (dialectical) opposition, unifies and separates the “two” motions in one and the “same” operation. On the one hand the act in which Macbeth makes “murder” more present as an imaginatively developed structure of mind is indistinguishable from his desire to explode that structure and ride recklessly away on the fantastical improbability of its reality. On the other hand, and conversely, the very negation of murder has a striking suggestion of being an imaginative effort to dig into its possible reality, to discover its possibility as real. The real equivocation, in summary, is not produced by the pros and cons of murder, by advantages and disadvantages, but by the fact that the collapse of dialectical oppositionality opens a “unified” sphere of precarious suggestion in which the entire corpus of the soliloquy can work at once for and against murder. Macbeth desires the absence of his presence to murder, but he also desires the presence of his absence from murder. From the deconstructionist viewpoint these “two” movements are (1) the same thing, and (2) not the same thing. The space “between” these two last alternatives is unthinkable, or is to be thought only in terms of unthinkability. The space “between” these two last alternatives is not a space. It cannot be intellectually “visualized”—but exists “in” (or through) discourse as a non-spatio-logical “instance.”
“Present fears / Are less than horrible imaginings” (1.3.137-38). Yes. But the presence of the horrible imaginings themselves is at once a move in the reassuring direction of “present fears” and a move away from what can be present. It is this “double” (and yet not double) movement that I shall consistently track throughout *Macbeth*: that Macbeth in servile fashion frantically presses all entities into their reassuring presence; but that this presencing in a sense is a mock-presencing of mock-presences, since “what” is made present is somehow always already intuited as empty of (full) presence. Thus Macbeth in a sense walks into a trap (the trap of “presence”); but since he has darkly foreseen the abyssal absence in the bosom of all presence, we may be entitled to feel that his self-entrapment is partly self-organized. Macbeth rids himself of “Macbeth,” paradoxically, by setting out to find him: he vaguely realizes that the prey, once caught, will vanish and thus cease to bother him.

### 3.3 THE DAGGERS OF ABSENCE

“Present fears / Are less than horrible imaginings” (1.3.137-38); “It is the bloody business which informs / Thus to mine eyes” (2.1.48-49); “My strange and self-abuse / Is the initiate fear, that wants hard use” (3.4.141-42). Vainly, Macbeth will attempt to rationalize the unbalancing of presence by trying to explain it (to himself and to others) in terms of lower-order mechanisms: inexperience, guilt, and so forth. As I have pointed out, Macbeth often follows the cue of Lady Macbeth in attempting such rationalizations—and, as I also have pointed out, the critics who themselves have a vested interest in bringing down the entire play to lower-order logic inadvertently come to share the sterile “either/or-ness” of the logical Lady. Macbeth’s submission to Lady Macbeth’s general initiative is at its most conspicuous degree of dishonesty in the Ghost scene of act 3:

**LADY M.**

Sit, worthy friends. My Lord is often thus,
And hath been from his youth: pray you, keep seat;
The fit is momentary; upon a thought
He will again be well. If much you note him,
You shall offend him, and extend his passion;
Feed, and regard him not. Are you a man?

**MACB.**

Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that
Which might appal the Devil.

**LADY M.**

This is the very painting of your fear:
This is the air-drawn dagger, which, you said,
Led you to Duncan. O! these flaws and starts
(Impostors to true fear), would well become
A woman's story at a winter's fire,
Authoris'd by her grandam. Shame itself!
Why do you make such faces? When all's done,
You look but on a stool.

(3.4.52-67)

A moment later:

[MACB.]
Do not muse at me, my most worthy friends,
I have a strange infirmity, which is nothing
To those that know me.

(3.4.84-86)

The infirmity “is nothing.” That is an interesting unit. Indeed the word “in-firmity” is itself of interest, strategically placed as it is. But primarily, here, the infirmity is nothing to the “worthy friends,” to “those that know me.” One implication of this statement is that the Macbethian “fit,” as unthinkable “infirmity,” is a meaningless “nothing” once translated into the world of Lady Macbeth and the “worthy friends.” The fit simply does not exist there, for it is not even possible there. But the stress on the unit “know” is also significant. The fit is meaningless once translated into the world of those that “know me.” This unit is related to a previous one, appearing right after the assassination:

[LADY M.]

So poorly in your thoughts.

MACB.

To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself.

(2.2.70-72)

Self-knowledge (and by implication also self-presence) is not compatible with the Macbethian condition. To know Macbeth is to be excluded from the dimension in which the infirmity reigns. This situation cannot be reduced to a mere question of guilt, that he does not want to “know” about his naughty misbehavior; nor can it be reduced to a question of insanity, that the fit is loss of self-presence in the medical sense. Although both of these “explanations” are moderately relevant and operative, they do not at all cover the main thrust of the dislocation that Shakespeare is working with: Macbeth's encounter with the unthinkable, with the absolutely weird and uncanny.

Lady Macbeth's “diagnosis” of Macbeth's ailment is clearly reductive. But while she (with certain critics) is blind to the naiveté in this mechanically organized pseudodiagnosis, the hero is not. Indeed, a striking feature in his entire tragic comportment is that he is “convinced” while still remaining unconvinced. He is
“convinced” that he wants to murder Duncan, “convinced” (by Lady Macbeth) that the deed will come off well, “convinced” that present fears will be less than horrible imaginings, “convinced” that his nerves will steady as political treachery becomes habitual, “convinced” that guilt is the cause of the hallucinated air-drawn dagger—but throughout all this conviction he remains secretly unconvinced. There is no conviction in Macbeth: and this, exactly, is what defines his metaphysical servitude. In metaphysics one is not convinced about anything; one doubts. And most of all one doubts oneself.

By being excluded, structurally, from the Macbethian fit and from the “radioactive” zone governing it through the Weird Sisters, Lady Macbeth is blind to the deconstruction of binary opposites that now unbalances presence and the possibility of presence. She thinks Macbeth ought to decide to be either sane or mad, either courageous or cowardly. Macbeth protests right in the middle of his fit that he is “a bold one” (3.4.58), and he is absolutely right—since Shakespeare, obviously, is forcing us to grasp an absolute quaking that is not a function of mere “fear.” Her intellect remains at the level of empirical positivism: “When all's done, / You look but on a stool” (3.4.66-67).

Through the curious sex-anthropology in this play, with its inversion of sexual distributions and of patterns of gender domination, Lady Macbeth comes to assume all the obnoxious aspects of patriarchal thinking. She patronizes Macbeth, seeks to bring him back into the logical system of masculine dialectic, male dominance in the name of order: “Are you a man?” (3.4.57). But this cheap trick of trying to coax Macbeth back into dialectical heroism founders on the fact that Macbeth's masculinity is not reducible to logical masculinity, to dialectic as mastery. There is a type of masculine affirmation, or affirmative masculinity, in Macbeth that outruns Lady Macbeth, “vanishes” from her presence and possible imagination. This masculinity, always already in touch with the weirdly androgynous (as monitored by the sisters), is only moved by her appeals to logical common sense in the most superficial way. Lady Macbeth's tragedy is that she thinks her cheap appropriation of Macbeth in the name of “male” logic prior to the murder (“you would / Be so much more the man,” 1.7.50-51) actually has a profound effect on him—actually could match the completely different influence exerted by the sisters. Again it is relevant to consider how Macbeth's tendency to be “convinced” reflects its opposite. But Lady Macbeth, dull to the play of opposites inside the soul of her husband, mechanically goes on dispatching her favorite medicine: the crude appeal to “maleness:” “What! quite unmann'd in folly?” (3.4.72).

Having assumed the pseudoheroic qualities of the dialectical male (“unsex me here,” 1.5.41), and having turned this maleness into the presence of what is “masculine” (“fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full / Of direst cruelty!”, 1.5.42-43) Lady Macbeth organizes her own presence as that which must necessarily be absent from the depth-formula of the play: equivocation. As one negotiating sexual difference as a dialectical difference, she cannot in any vital sense engage with the sexual play of the drama; she can only play that play melodramatically, by means of overacting: “Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor! / Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter! / Thy letters have transported me” (1.5.54-56). There is a tonal difference between this discourse and that similar one used by the Weird Sisters to greet the hero (1.3.48-69), and while the latter greeting casts a spell over him, the former almost has the effect of putting him off. Lady Macbeth speaks univocally, pointing to the target of what will need to be present, pointing to self-presence in ideal presence; but Macbeth is already attuned to a quite different appeal—so that his wife's effusions are slightly boring, almost embarrassing. When he finally agrees to move along with her empirical project (which she wants to make present immediately), he is much like a husband who agrees to go on a holiday with his wife while secretly realizing that he is not going to enjoy himself and that he has not really swallowed the “convincing” arguments for the enterprise. Ironically, by having prematurely abandoned her femininity in a simplistic fashion, Lady Macbeth removes herself from participation in the “woman's story” that she derides: “O! these flaws and starts … would well become / A woman's story” (3.4.62-64). The play Macbeth, as equivocal discourse promoted by the sisters, as undialectical action evading patriarchal logocentricity, is in a certain sense exactly that: “A woman's story.” Lady Macbeth not only fails to be able to actively participate in this story/play, not only becomes more and more disconnected from its principles and possibilities; she also is
shown to be permanently falling away from a dialogue with its protagonist, from any vital proximity to him.

“O proper stuff! / This is the very painting of your fear: / This is the air-drawn dagger, which, you said, / Led you to Duncan” (3.4.59-62). The connection that Lady Macbeth establishes here is important: not only does Shakespeare make us feel that the fit in the banquet scene (3.4) is related to the dagger-fit (2.1); he also makes us feel that Lady Macbeth’s radical uncomprehension of the entity “fit” antecedes the murder as such: she is not only out of touch with a tormented post-murder Macbeth full of “remorse,” but also out of touch with the very Macbeth who saw murder as such presence itself in terms of its opposite (repulsion-from-murder) and absence (absurdity).

Significantly, it is Lady Macbeth who interrupts Macbeth (at the end of his “If it were done” soliloquy) at the very moment when he has realized that his attraction to murder is in an originary way organized by its unattractiveness, that he thinks about murder (more and more obsessively) because his purity of mind utterly forbids such thinking. But when Macbeth has come to the consolidation of the idea that “murder” is a cognitive circuit in his mind, no more than a self-determined nothingness, Lady Macbeth interrupts this line of thought and immediately turns things down into the lower-order levels of relevance: getting the business done, moving along the path of ambition without further inhibitions. The “surrender” of Macbeth to her acts of “persuasion” is less interesting here—on account of the emptiness of the surrender, its quality of theatrical staging—than the mind of the hero as, quite unaffected by the token-commitment to “murder,” it goes on exploring the future in terms of the absence of murder/future/commitment.

The soliloquy on the air-drawn dagger is now obviously a speech of great importance. The dagger makes its entry as an utter stranger (“Is this a dagger, which I see before me, / The handle toward my hand?” 2.1.33-34)—and, most strange of all, as an absolute stranger also to the business of murder!

So absent indeed is Macbeth from murder as volitional enterprise that he requires that pointing dagger as an indispensable connective link that is to attach him to the possibility of murder. He needs the dagger to connect him with the dagger; he needs the pointing of the dagger to feel its point. I am saying, in other words, that the hallucinated (and therefore “absent”) dagger presents Macbeth with the intention that he should have had.

The dagger is a dagger of intentionality. It points to the chamber; it signals the direction of an intention. But the intention is not in the subject, not in Macbeth. It is in the dagger, in the not-Macbeth. The dagger becomes present to Macbeth as Macbeth’s absence from it.

Is this a dagger, which I see before me,  
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee:—  
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.  
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible  
To feeling, as to sight? or art thou but  
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?  
I see thee yet, in form as palpable  
As this which now I draw.  
Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going;  
And such an instrument I was to use.—  
Mine eyes are made the fools o'th'other senses,  
Or else worth all the rest: I see thee still;  
And on thy blade, and dudgeon, gouts of blood,  
Which was not so before.

(2.1.33-47)

The contradictory structure is obvious. On the one hand, Macbeth already knew the way he was to go (“the
way that I was going”); on the other hand, the dagger has to point out this way. The dagger is a supplement. The marshalling is at once a supplementary necessity and an absurd surplus, it is at once purely dispensable and purely indispensable.25 On the one hand, the supplementary dagger (in hallucination) gives Macbeth the murder weapon he requires for murder’s possible presence; on the other hand, he already has at his immediate disposal this very dagger that is to bridge the gap between nonmurder and murder—indeed he draws it and places it beside its visionary partner.

Curiously, but not insignificantly, we are made to feel that the absent dagger is more present than the present one. The one that Macbeth draws for comparative contemplation is a kind of inert equivalent that nevertheless is no equivalent: it lacks the power of its visible/invisible copy. The secondary (hallucinated) dagger acquires a hyperontological primacy, and the prime weapon itself—the one to be used in the butchery—remains behind in a world of uninteresting secondariness, drained of drama, equivocation, and tragic vision.

It seems to me, however, that the absent dagger (of hallucination) slides into the finite, real, and material dagger that Macbeth is ready to use. In this way, the absence of the dagger is carried over into the gesture of murdering itself: so that in an important sense that murder is never truly actual, never truly present. The air-drawn dagger fills with alien intention a Macbethian intentionality that is at bottom structurally empty; but conversely, the very unreality of that hallucinated weapon preserves murder as something nonempirical and “distant” in Macbeth’s inner drama. It is interesting from this viewpoint that Macbeth “forgets” to leave the daggers he uses near the corpse (much to the surprise and frustration of his wife, 2.2.47). It is indeed as if the act of being hypnotized by “the dagger” continues to be operative even when “real” weapons have replaced “air-drawn” ones. Macbeth trembles at the sight of his bloody hands and bloody daggers (a fact suggesting mere retreat and repulsion); but as I shall argue later, there is a process of attraction beneath the fear—which is precisely why there is more than “fear” in motion here. Macbeth sticks to blood/hands/daggers, and he does so, I suggest, because these things maintain the work of absence (from murder) that the air-drawn dagger (as something absent) has inaugurated.

From an orthodox viewpoint, the sudden appearance of “gouts of blood” on the dagger (2.1.46) seems to call forth the horrible future of the impending deed: the knife’s transformation from spotless innocence to gory sacrilege. But in my view a more suggestive movement is also being dramatized: the further filling of empty and absent intention with the “stuff” of its required order. Just as the hallucinated dagger provided Macbeth’s absence-from-murder with a modicum of suggestive presence-to-murder, so the reddening of the abstractly dangling blade signals a deepening of a presentation of intentionality as such. Macbeth sees his intention gather into intention—into sanguine reality of purpose—but this very hardening, coloring, and materializing takes place outside him, in a sphere not quite inhabited by any self-present presence.

In summary, then, the dagger shows Macbeth the way, but it is of course Macbeth who is showing Macbeth the way. The “first” Macbeth, as heroic master committed to idealistic “struggle to death” for transcendental recognition, has an absence of intent to murder Duncan; the “second” Macbeth, the metaphysically servile cogito, has a full and self-present intent to murder. But this second, servile Macbeth, who is self-present and fully intentional, is quite absent, has to be “created”: has, indeed, to be dramatized and staged. Hence the dream of that self-presence and full intentionality will remain punctured by the spacings of dramaturgy and creative nonpresence. Macbeth seeking to clutch the dagger is Macbeth seeking to clutch Macbeth, desiring the palpable presence of his own self-present thought, some creature who could be the absolute monarch of his own intentionality. Yet as I have tried to show in this analysis, this act of wanting to presence a self-present cogito carries with it traces of the originary resistance to this process. I see the “air-drawn dagger” as such a “trace.”26 By pointing, it traces into the future what full presence has lacked from the outset.

Notes

3. Ibid., p. 108.
4. Ibid., p. 119.
5. Ibid., p. 114.
6. Muir argues that the eye-versus-hand imagery “is Shakespearian” (KM, 25); but it could be argued that the too-obvious Shakespearean stress here is exactly what looks suspicious. The passage contains the Shakespearean building blocks, but does it contain the Shakespearean way of assembling these blocks?
7. Shakespeare and Tragedy, p. 69.
8. See Bartholomeusz, Macbeth and the Players, p. 259.
10. Shakespeare and Tragedy, p. 69.
11. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 201.
15. Ibid., p. 201.
16. Ibid., p. 202. I should perhaps emphasize, here, that I am in favor of retaining the Folio punctuation. This is not the place to undertake a critique of the “emendation” currently institutionalized; all I can say at this moment, by way of a general remark, is that the grammatically “correct” punctuation that we now have is an ontologizing construct that spoils a number of crucial spacings in the text. The cryptoromantic and ultra-ontologizing “bank and shoal of time” instead of “bank and school of time” is another interesting “improvement”—especially from the viewpoint of a critique of metaphysical presence.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., p. 203.
21. It may be objected that in discussing a process of “absencing” in Macbeth, I am contradicting my main thesis: that the hero gradually shifts over into a quest for metaphysical presence. But matters cannot be oversimplified. It all very much depends on what we mean by “Macbeth.” There certainly is a Macbeth who in the most alarming and conspicuous manner falls into a quest for presence. But the name “Macbeth” is never reducible to a presence: “other” Macbeths are operative “offstage.” In addition, as I argue all along, the structural impossibility of (metaphysical) presence, of presence as absolute self-presence, ensures the production of an absent Macbeth by the production of a present one.
24. Macbeth eventually makes his wife's melodramatic tone his own for a while: “Bring forth men-children only!” (1.7.73). Could it be argued that this tonal mimesis too is fragile?—that it too is not altogether convincing?
25. Calderwood's definition of the Derridean “supplement” involves “an excess added to a sufficiency, but paradoxically, because its presence implies a prior insufficiency, also a replacement of a lack” (If It Were Done, p. 57). This process, as I argue too, is true for the play as a whole. The general movement traces the paradox of the work of the “supplement.” “Each fulfillment creates a lack to be filled,” and the “fullness of final presence—the apparent closure of an end—fades even as it appears” (ibid., p. 69).

Bibliography
In the following essay, Cantor identifies a fundamental tension between the heroic pagan ethic and the Christian values associated with conscience and meekness in Macbeth. The critic maintains that Macbeth's attempt to synthesize these antithetical values causes him to conceive of a debased form of absolutism that negates both ethics systems and corrupts his perspective of the natural order.

I regard the bad conscience as the serious illness that [men were] bound to contract under the stress of the most fundamental change [they] ever experienced—that change which occurred when [they] found [themselves] finally enclosed within the walls of society and of peace. … Suddenly all their instincts were disvalued and “suspended.” … They felt unable to cope with the simplest undertakings; in this new world they no longer possessed their former guides, their regulating, unconscious and infallible drives: they were reduced to thinking, inferring, reckoning, co-ordinating cause and effect … they were reduced to their “consciousness.” … I believe there has never been such a feeling of misery on earth … and at the same time the old instincts had not suddenly ceased to make their usual demands! Only it was hardly or rarely possible to humor them: as a rule they had to seek new and, as it were, subterranean gratifications.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals
Midway through *Macbeth*, the newly crowned king tries to convince some desperate men to murder his rival Banquo. Claiming that in the past Banquo thwarted their advancement, Macbeth questions whether the chosen murderers will take their injury lying down. More specifically, his challenge takes the form of asking them if they are prepared to turn the other cheek:

*Your patience so predominant in your nature  
That you can let this go? Are you so gospell'd,  
To pray for this good man, and for his issue,  
Whose heavy hand hath bow'd you to the grave,  
And beggar'd yours for ever?*

(III.i.85-90)

In Macbeth's remarkable use of the word *gospell'd* here, we hear the noble warrior's contempt for Christian forbearance and the tame willingness to endure injury without responding. The murderers understand what Macbeth is getting at, and, realizing that their very manhood is being questioned, they reply accordingly: “We are men, my liege” (III.i.90).

Macbeth goes on to articulate the concept of manliness the murderers are alluding to:

*Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men,  
As hounds and greyhounds, mungrels, spaniels, curs,  
Shoughs, water-rugs, and demi-wolves are clipt  
All by the name of dogs; the valued file  
Distinguishes the swift, the slow, the subtle,  
The house-keeper, the hunter, every one,  
According to the gift which bounteous nature  
Hath in him clos'd; whereby he does receive  
Particular addition, from the bill  
That writes them all alike; and so of men.*

(III.i.91-100)

In its sense that all dogs are not created equal, this speech embodies the aristocratic or heroic conception of manhood. Macbeth is asking the murderers: are you merely run-of-the-mill human beings or are you real men, men who know how to stand up for themselves? The distinction Macbeth is making is best captured in Homeric Greek, in the difference between the terms *aner* and *anthropoi*. The Homeric hero is an *aner*, a he-man, raised above the ordinary run of human beings (*anthropoi*) by virtue of his manly strength and courage. In Homer, the difference between the hero and the ordinary human being is often presented as the difference between two kinds of animals, like the contrast between noble and base dogs in Macbeth's speech, or even more like the contrast between tame and wild species drawn earlier in the play when a character talks of “sparrows” versus “eagles” or “the hare” versus “the lion” (I.ii.35). Macbeth sees a natural hierarchy among human beings: some are noble and some are base. Taking the view that a noble man would scorn to receive an injury tamely, Macbeth tries to shame the potential murderers into doing his will. But he realizes that this notion of noble heroism may be challenged in Scotland. A new gospel is abroad in the land, which teaches a Christian way of life, a gospel of peace and humility, opposed to the way of life of the warrior.

Shakespeare develops the tragedy of *Macbeth* out of this tension between the heroic warrior's ethic and the gospel truth. The story of Macbeth gave Shakespeare a chance to portray a world in which Christianity has changed the fabric of society, but in which some characters still think back nostalgically to the time before their nation was gospelled. Shakespeare seems to have been drawn to the situation of characters caught between two ways of life, an old and a new. In his tragedies, he often chose locales that allowed him to portray the clash of ethical alternatives; he liked to set the dramatic action at a point of intersection, a place
where two antithetical ways of life cross. The Scotland of Macbeth is such a border land. It seems to lie at the
crossroads of two different worlds, poised between warlike paganism and saintlike Christianity. At the
beginning of the play, the peace of Scotland has been shattered by attacks by more primitive forces stemming
from the west and the north, from the Hebrides and Norway (I.1.12, 31). These soldiers are referred to as
“kerns and gallowglasses” (I.1.13), archaic terms that suggest foreign and barbaric troops. To the south of
Scotland lies England, presented within the terms of the play as a more fully Christian land. In fact England is
explicitly said to have a saint as a king, Edward the Confessor, who is repeatedly described in profoundly
Christian terms:

To the succeeding royalty he leaves
The healing benediction. With this strange virtue,
He hath a heavenly gift of prophecy,
And sundry blessings hang about his throne
That speak him full of grace.

(IV.iii.155-9)

In the symbolic geography of the play, then, Scotland stands as it were midway between Norway and
England, less barbaric than Norway but less Christian than England.

This situation is similar to the symbolic geography Shakespeare creates in other tragedies. In Othello, for
example, Cyprus stands as it were midway between the Christian civilization of Venice and the pagan
barbarism of the Ottoman Empire, a situation that reflects the division within Othello's soul. In Hamlet,
Shakespeare's Denmark conveys the same sense of lying on the fringes of European civilization. To the north
of Denmark lies, again, Norway, a land of warlike characters such as Fortinbras, and hence the source of the
Homeric heroism of single combat. To the south lie the centers of sophisticated Christian civilization, such as
Paris and Wittenberg. The geographic divisions in the play once again reflect divisions within the hero's soul.
Hamlet is tragically divided between pagan and Christianity, especially when faced with the duty of
revenge, a task to which the two ways of life dictate antithetical responses.

The idea of geography as divided heritage permeates Macbeth. The Scottish characters in the play are on the
whole presented as believing Christians. Christian expressions come readily to their lips, as, for example, in
Macduff's report of the death of Duncan, when he speaks of how “Most sacrilegious murther hath broke ope /
The Lord's anointed temple” (II.iii.67-68). Macbeth himself clearly shows the influence of Christianity, as his
wife notes when she is wondering whether he really is up to the challenge of becoming king:

Yet do

It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily.

(I.v.16-21)

Lady Macbeth here thinks of her husband in the same terms he later applies to the murderers of Banquo; his
compassionate religion threatens to undermine his heroic manliness.

But there are signs that the Christianity of the characters in Macbeth does not always run deep, or that it may
be confused with older, pagan notions. Consider Macbeth's bewilderment at his inability to join the grooms in
their prayers:
One cried, “God bless us!” and “Amen!” the other,  
As they had seen me with these hangman’s hands.  
List’n ing their fear, I could not say “Amen,”  
When they did say “God bless us!”

LADY M.

MACB.

But wherefore could not I pronounce “Amen”?

I had most need of blessing, and “Amen”  
Stuck in my throat.

(II.i.24-30)

Someone might offer this passage as proof of Macbeth's Christianity, but in fact it points to a certain superficiality in his embrace of the newer religion. He thinks of Amen as a kind of pagan talisman, a magic formula that can be mechanically invoked, even by a criminal in the middle of his crime. Macbeth would gladly take any benefits he might obtain from Christianity, but he does not fully accept the moral demands the religion makes upon its believers. At least Claudius in Hamlet understands that his deeds are incompatible with his attempt to pray like a Christian. But here Macbeth seems to reduce Christianity to a mere set of verbal formulas. His case suggests that Christianity has not completely triumphed in the Scotland of Macbeth and is in fact in competition with and threatened by other forces. In the minds of warriors like Macbeth, older pagan ideas still maintain their force, strangely mixing with newer Christian beliefs.\textsuperscript{11}

This analysis of the basic situation in Macbeth helps explain Duncan's problem in the play. Duncan is trying to act like a Christian monarch in a country that is not fully Christianized and that thus retains a strong element of an older, savage heroism. He is obviously not a warlike king; when we first see him (I.i), he is allowing his nobles to do his fighting for him.\textsuperscript{12} When characters in the play speak of Duncan's good qualities, they never credit him with the kind of virtues associated with a king's military function. Rather they tend to speak of his generosity or, in a key speech by Macbeth, of his meekness and his ability to evoke pity (I.vii.16-25). In all these respects, he seems to resemble England's Edward rather than the bellicose king of Norway. By his own admission, Duncan is too trusting of humanity, blind to the ambition lurking in the hearts of his nobles (I.iv.12-15). Within the terms of the play, he is presented as an anomaly in Scotland.\textsuperscript{13} All the other leaders in Scotland are warlike men, great field generals like Macbeth, Banquo, and Macduff. Only Duncan does not lead his troops into battle;\textsuperscript{14} instead he must stand on the sidelines, receiving reports, asking like an outsider to the war: “What bloody man is that?” (I.ii.1). Duncan is crucially dependent on his great nobles to fight his battles for him and to stand up to the barbaric invaders.\textsuperscript{15}

Hence Duncan's fatal error is not to recognize and acknowledge how weak and insecure his position truly is. The Scotland of the play is presented as a kind of elective monarchy, one in which the powerful nobles have a say in who becomes their king.\textsuperscript{16} The Scottish King cannot be said to serve at the pleasure of the great nobles, but he is so dependent on their military power that he must constantly work to maintain their allegiance. Duncan's generosity with titles, honors, and gifts to his thanes is a way of dealing with this problem. But he makes one key error: he nominates Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland, thereby trying to ensure his son's designation as the next king of Scotland.\textsuperscript{17} Duncan acts as if he were already living under a system of
hereditary monarchy, as if he were in fully civilized England rather than more primitive Scotland. By prematurely naming Malcolm as his successor, Duncan undermines one of the holds a king in his circumstances has on his thanes. They might remain loyal to him in the hope that he would eventually throw his weight in favor of one of them succeeding him to the throne. Duncan's designation of Malcolm as his successor proves disastrous as the action unfolds, provoking Macbeth into murdering the king, rather than waiting for events to propel him to the throne.

Duncan does not seem to understand the political necessities of the regime he rules. Moreover, he seems temperamentally unsuited to maintaining control of a land in which constant warfare has become a way of life. The civil war in Scotland with which the play begins is testimony to Duncan's failure as a king. Shakespeare found this point made explicitly in his source in Holinshed's *Chronicles*:

> The beginning of Duncans reigne was verie quiet and peaceable, without anie notable trouble; but after it was perceived how negligent he was in punishing offendors, manie misruled persons tooke occasion thereof to trouble the peace and quiet state of the common-wealth, by seditious commotions which first had their beginnings in this wise.\(^{18}\)

Holinshed blames the failure of Duncan's rule on his forbearance toward his subjects. The very meekness of Duncan, which makes him admirable as a Christian, works against his success as a king in a warlike society. The idea that the ethical principles of Christianity might not always work well in the rough-and-tumble world of Scottish politics is developed later in *Macbeth* when Lady Macduff finds herself in danger even though, or perhaps precisely because, she is morally innocent:

> I have done no harm. But I remember now
> I am in this earthly world—where to do harm
> Is often laudable, to do good sometimes
> Accounted dangerous folly. Why then, alas,
> Do I put up that womanly defense,
> To say I have done no harm?

(IV.ii.74-79)\(^{19}\)

This idea of a double standard, of a conflict between worldly and otherworldly principles, is basic to *Macbeth*, often imaged, as here, in terms of manliness versus womanliness.

The germ of this conception can be found in Holinshed's contrast of Duncan's character with Macbeth's:

> Makbeth [was] a valiant gentleman, and one that if he had not been somewhat cruell of nature, might have beeene thought most woorthie the government of a realme. On the other part, Duncane was so soft and gentle of nature, that the people wished the inclinations and maners of these two cousins to have beeene so tempered and enterchangeable bestowed betwixt them, that where the one had too much of clemencie, and the other of crueltie, the meane vertue betwixt these two extremeties might have reigned by indifferent partition in them both, so should Duncane have proved a woorthie king, and Makbeth an excellent capteine.\(^{20}\)

By juxtaposing cruelty and clemency, this passage points to the contrast between the warlike spirit of paganism and the compassion of Christianity.\(^{21}\) We are used to concentrating on the tragedy of Macbeth, but the play also presents the tragedy of Duncan, tragically caught between the more civilized notion of Christian kingship embodied in Edward the Confessor and the more primitive notion of the king as battlefield warrior, embodied in both Macbeth and the King of Norway.
This contrast in notions of kingship is expressed most vividly in Shakespeare's source in Holinshed by the traitor, Makdowald, who calls Duncan "a faint-hearted milkesop, more meet to governe a sort of idle monks in some cloister, than to have the rule of such valiant and hardie men of warre as the Scots were." \(^{22}\) This passage may have suggested to Shakespeare the theme of the heroic warrior's contempt for Christian meekness. Makdowald's taunt to Duncan resembles the speech of the usurper York to Henry VI in one of Shakespeare's history plays:

That head of thine doth not become a crown:  
Thy hand is made to grasp a palmer's staff  
And not to grace an aweful princely sceptre.  
That gold must round engirt these brows of mine,  
Whose smile and frown, like to Achilles' spear,  
Is able with the change to kill and cure.

\((2 \text{ Henry VI, V.i.96-101})\)

The contrast between Duncan and Macbeth recapitulates and deepens the contrast Shakespeare drew between the saintly Henry VI and the warlike Richard III in one of his earliest works (and his first study of tyranny).\(^{23}\)

The outcome of \textit{Macbeth} harks back to the result of the Wars of the Roses in Shakespeare's First Tetralogy. The destruction of the great aristocratic leaders in England, culminating in the carnage created by Richard III, made possible the centralizing of the English monarchy under Henry VII and the Tudor dynasty. Similarly in \textit{Macbeth}, a sufficient number of potential rivals to the throne have been eliminated by the end of the play to give some plausibility to the idea that Malcolm may reign more peacefully than his father did. Such considerations might explain Shakespeare's dwelling on the moment when Malcolm attempts to reconstitute his feudal followers: "My thanes and kinsmen, / Henceforth be earls, the first that ever Scotland / In such an honor nam'd" (V.i.28-30). The transformation of the thanes into earls seems to represent an anglicizing of Scotland, an attempt to convert a barbaric consortium of feudal chieftains into a comparatively centralized monarchy, in which all honors and titles now flow from the throne.\(^{24}\) Thus, by inducing his enemies to call in English aid from the saintly Edward, Macbeth may ironically have completed the process of the gospelling of Scotland he scorns.\(^{25}\) Despite his contempt for the overrefinement of the "English epicures" (V.ii.8), Macbeth ends up giving them a foothold in Scotland. Malcolm anticipates that the English aid will bring about the domestication of Scotland: "I hope the days are near at hand / That chambers will be safe" (V.ii.1-2), and he strongly associates the English forces with the power of Christianity (IV.iii.189-92). Though Malcolm begins the play just as dependent as his father on help from his subordinates in warfare (I.ii.3-5), by the end he shows signs of having learned from Duncan's mistakes. In particular, judging by Malcolm's canny behavior with Macduff in Act IV, scene iii, he evidently has outgrown his father's overly trusting attitude. Perhaps Malcolm is ready by the end of the play to provide the synthesis of Duncan and Macbeth Holinshed projected. Having learned a certain toughmindedness from his enemies, Malcolm may be able to mediate between Christian and pagan kingship.\(^{26}\) Nevertheless, in the main action of \textit{Macbeth} the tension between these two worlds remains acute. Duncan, never realizing his errors, goes blindly to his death, but Macbeth has some sense of the peculiarity of his situation. Consider his speech when he is terrified by the appearance of Banquo's ghost at his feast:

Blood hath been shed ere now, i' th' olden time,  
Ere humane statute purg'd the gentle weal;  
Ay, and since too, murthers have been perform'd  
Too terrible for the ear. The time has been,  
That when the brains were out, the man would die,  
And there an end; but now they rise again  
With twenty mortal murthers on their crowns,  
And push us from our stools.
The horror of the occasion calls forth from Macbeth a strong sense of the contrast between the past (the “olden time”) and the present moment. He acknowledges that a kind of progress has been made in Scotland, a process of civilizing in which the Christian spirit has tamed the barbarism of its warriors (“humane statute” has “purged the gentle weal”). But Macbeth does not see this process as an unequivocal gain. And what troubles him about the new dispensation in Scotland is something specifically Christian: quite literally the new possibility of resurrection (“now they rise again”; see also III.iv.73-75). In this speech he is looking back with nostalgia to the pagan past, when a man, once dead, had the decency to stay dead.

Macbeth’s reaction reflects the disorientation of the old-style pagan warrior faced with the new worldview and expanded cosmic horizons of Christianity. He has never had a problem dealing face-to-face with a living human opponent. That is the sort of situation he has been trained to handle as a warrior. What he cannot deal with is some kind of supernatural apparition, a power not of this world:

What man dare, I dare.
Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,
The arm’d rhinoceros, or th’ Hyrcan tiger,
Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble.

Nothing in or of this world could frighten the courageous warrior Macbeth, but forces that appear to come from another world terrify him, although as we shall see they also appear to touch—or perhaps even call into being—something deep within his soul. To be sure, one cannot simply equate supernatural apparitions with the force of Christianity; as Senecan drama reminds us, ghosts are possible in a pagan framework as well. Though Shakespeare evidently worked to reduce the element of the supernatural in his portrait of the early Roman Republic in Coriolanus, one way he dramatized the weakening of the old civil religion as the Republic waned was to emphasize supernatural forces in Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra. But even when they are confronted by ghosts, and genuinely shaken by the experience, Shakespeare’s Romans do not react with the panic that seizes Macbeth. Brutus’s cool encounter with the ghost of Caesar is representative:

BRU.

Art thou some god, some angel, or some devil,
That mak’st my blood cold, and my hair to stare?
Speak to me what thou art.

GHOST.

Thy evil spirit, Brutus.

BRU.

GHOST.

To tell thee thou shalt see me at Philippi.

BRU.
Well; then I shall see thee again?

GHOST.

Ay, at Philippi.

BRU.

Why, I will see thee at Philippi then. [Exit Ghost.]

Now I have taken heart thou vanishest.

Ill spirit, I would hold more talk with thee.

(IV.iii.279-288)

Though at first frightened by the appearance of Caesar's ghost, Brutus quickly pulls himself together. His calm and collected response—"Why, I will see thee at Philippi then"—is a good measure of the moderation with which Shakespeare's Romans accept the intrusion of the supernatural in their lives. Shakespeare was aware that the pagan world allowed for the possibility of the supernatural, but, as he shows, the gulf between the natural and the supernatural was not as wide or as sharply drawn in paganism. Strictly speaking, one might even say that paganism predates the genuine and full distinction between the natural and the supernatural. Allowing for a continuum between god and man, with all sorts of intermediary figures such as heroes and daimonia, paganism does not tend to separate a divine realm from a human realm in the radical way that Christianity does, with its transcendent conception of deity and hence its sense of the unbridgeable gulf between man and God. This is admittedly a complicated issue, but with all the necessary qualifications being made, it is accurate to say that Christianity is distinctly more otherworldly as a religion than classical paganism. Macbeth reacts more violently than Brutus to the supernatural apparitions in his life because he thinks of them as causing a radical rift in his existence, marking a kind of epoch ("The time has been, / That when the brains were out, the man would die"). In Macbeth Shakespeare explores what happens to a pagan warrior wrenched out of his narrow horizons and displaced into a Christian context, with its radical divide between this world and the next.

These speeches in Act III, scene iv highlight a peculiar fact about Shakespeare's Macbeth: for a courageous man, he is remarkably subject to moments of fear. He begins the play as a model of courage; no one could be braver on the battlefield. But in the course of the action, he is increasingly tormented by doubts and fears. Lady Macbeth states the paradox of his character succinctly: "Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier and afeard?" (V.i.36-37). Though basically a stalwart warrior, with his feet planted firmly on the ground, Macbeth finds himself living in a slippery world of ghosts and apparitions that haunt his waking hours and torment his dreams, leaving him in a confused state in which "present fears / Are less than horrible imaginings," and "function / Is smother'd in surmise" until for him "nothing is / But what is not" (I.iii.137-142). Faced with a world where "the earth hath bubbles, as the water has" (I.iii.79), Macbeth constantly experiences the melting away of anything he thought provided a foundation for his existence. Shaken to the core of his being by the strange visions that come upon him, Macbeth is left at sea and wonders how his wife can keep her equilibrium:

Can such things be,
And overcome us like a summer's cloud,
Without our special wonder? You make me strange
Even to the disposition that I owe,
When now I think you can behold such sights,
And keep the natural ruby of your cheeks,
When mine is blanch'd with fear.
Macbeth undergoes an extraordinary transformation in the course of the play, from a manly hero to what he himself describes as “the baby of a girl” (III.iv.105).

At the beginning of the play Macbeth appears to be the most admired man in Scotland. In the second scene, people are singing his praises, celebrating precisely his courage as a warrior:

> For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
> Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
> Which smok’d with bloody execution,
> (Like Valor’s minion) carv’d out his passage
> Till he fac’d the slave;
> Which nev’r shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
> Till he unseam’d him from the nave to th’ chops,
> And fix’d his head upon our battlements.

(I.ii.16-23)

Macbeth first appears in the play as a kind of Homeric hero, cutting his way through lesser men on the battlefield like a Scottish Achilles (the Homeric similes throughout this battle narrative give an epic feel to the passage). In our first glimpse of Macbeth, he is hacking a man in half—and is being commended for it. Even the meek King Duncan is favorably impressed by Macbeth's heroism, calling him “valiant cousin, worthy gentleman” and “noble Macbeth” (I.ii.24, 67).

Later in the play, characters view Macbeth as a bloody, cruel, violent tyrant, but at the beginning he is praised for the same savage qualities—as long as they are directed against Scotland's enemies. Unfortunately for the warrior, how he is evaluated depends on the context of his violence, whether it is perceived as in the service of his own community or opposed to it. The epic language of Act I, scene ii suggests a situation typical of the genre. It involves a variant of the original epic conflict, what one might call the Achilles-Agamemnon problem, the dilemma of the legitimate king who is weaker as a military figure than one of his great warriors.

But if Macbeth begins the play as a kind of Scottish Achilles, he certainly does not end that way. We cannot imagine Achilles plotting to murder Agamemnon in secret—if he decided to kill the king, he would do it openly. Achilles can be very cruel, but the Iliad builds up to the moment when he shows compassion to Priam. The movement of Macbeth is just the reverse—the hero becomes crueler as the play progresses. What accounts for this difference between Achilles and Macbeth as heroes? I want to make what will at first sound like a perverse argument, that the transformation of Macbeth can be traced to the impact of Christianity. This point is, to say the least, counterintuitive: as a gospel of meekness Christianity ought to tame the fierceness and savagery of a warrior, not inflame it. Indeed we witness this process happening in Scotland; as we have seen, it may explain Duncan's imprudent clemency and seems to have provoked Macbeth's contempt for gospelling.

But now I am not examining the case of the warrior tamed by Christianity. Rather I want to consider the more complicated case Shakespeare is intrigued by in Macbeth: what happens when a warrior retains his martial spirit, and yet allows it to be redirected or reconstituted in a new Christian context? Macbeth stays a warrior, and even expresses scorn for the new religion of meekness. And yet he is secretly affected by it, secretly accepts its premises, almost against his will. Macbeth is not immune to the Christian critique of heroism and hence he cannot remain true to the old-style pagan ethic in its pure form. Consider the moment just before Macbeth's death when he refuses to kill himself: “Why should I play the Roman fool, and die / On mine own sword?” (V.viii.1-2). Who taught Macbeth that the Romans were fools? My answer is: the Christian gospellers. Roman suicide was based on the principle that honor is more precious than life, and thus in certain circumstances a noble man would rather kill himself than live on in disgrace. To Christian thinkers, this
principle was an example of pagan vanity, of placing the transitory value of worldly honor above the eternal value of one's immortal soul. Macbeth is obviously not approaching the issue as a theologian, but the way he abjures suicide and desperately clings to life does suggest something in him opposed to pagan attitudes.

What Macbeth has learned from Christianity is contempt for the transitoriness of pagan values and an appreciation of eternity. I am not saying that he behaves like a good Christian, in the way, for example, Duncan does. Rather he tries to remain true to a warrior's ethic, but he reinterprets that ethic with a distinctly Christian inflection, though this obviously involves a significant distortion of Christianity. Holinshed held out the prospect of a positive synthesis of pagan and Christian ethics, of combining “cruelty” and “clemency” and thus moderating the bad effects of both. In the figure of Macbeth, Shakespeare creates the demonic counterpart of this happy synthesis of pagan and Christian, a heroic warrior who turns tyrant in pursuit of a secularized version of the Christian Absolute.36

To clarify Macbeth's transformation of the heroic ideal, it is useful to contrast him with Achilles. Homer's hero is famous for having been confronted with a tragic choice between a long but obscure life and a brief but glorious one. His character is defined by his opting for the second possibility, and to many his decision has seemed the prototype of all tragic choices.37 But what is characteristic of Macbeth is precisely his refusal to be bound by the terms of Achilles' choice. Macbeth wants to have the best of both worlds; he obsessively pursues the goal of a long and glorious life. He is driven by the idea that any glory is worthless to him unless it can be prolonged, perhaps forever (through his posterity). This is the way Macbeth covertly accepts the Christian critique of pagan heroism. For Christian thinkers, Achilles is the archetype of pagan vanity, willfully embracing glory at the price of his own transitoriness. Macbeth rejects this pagan foolishness. At the peak of his success as King of Scotland, he says: “To be thus is nothing, / But to be safely thus” (III.i.47-48). This line is profoundly characteristic of Macbeth, and shows his peculiarity as a hero. He is an absolutist, with an all-or-nothing attitude; his achievement is worthless to him unless it is perfectly secure. Macbeth's scorn for the transitoriness of pagan values leads to a concern for safety that seems unheroic by classical standards. One cannot imagine Achilles saying at the moment of his triumph over Hector: “To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus.” Achilles' scorn for his safety is the hallmark of his character and his distinctive brand of heroism.38 One can find no better measure of the transformation of the idea of heroism in the figure of Macbeth than his almost bourgeois concern for the security of his achievement.39

We can see the impact of the Christian context on Macbeth's thinking in the famous opening of his soliloquy contemplating the murder of Duncan:

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If th' assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease, success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all—here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come.

(I.vii.1-7)

The simple fact that Macbeth is thinking about the “life to come” immediately suggests his difference from a purely pagan hero. As Shakespeare does in the key scene in which Hamlet is considering killing Claudius, the playwright indicates how the expansion of Christian horizons to include an afterlife changes the terms of heroic action.40 Someone might immediately object that Macbeth's point in this passage is precisely that he would like to “jump the life to come,” to exclude thoughts of the afterlife from his deliberations. As in his later complaint about the dead coming back to life, he seems to long for the contraction of his horizons back to pagan dimensions, so that he would only have to worry about what happens in this life. But the very fact that Macbeth wishes to exclude thoughts of the afterlife shows that Christianity has in fact altered his manner.
of thinking.

Indeed, no matter how unchristian the object of Macbeth's thinking in this soliloquy is, his thought processes display the influence of Christianity. Instead of unthinkingly plunging into action, he tries to analyze his situation with an almost priestly dissection of motive and consequence. The tortuous syntax of his speech reveals a mind turning inward, opening up its depths. If Macbeth is an Achilles, he is an Achilles with a conscience. As is even more evident later in his anguished reaction to having murdered Duncan, Macbeth has become aware of the moral dimension of human action, even though he does not act morally. That is why he strikes us as a more complex figure than a purely pagan hero. His exposure to Christianity has created a division in his soul, which makes it impossible for him to act singlemindedly or to face the consequences of his actions without flinching. The initial description of Macbeth on the battlefield might lead us to expect him to be a brainless fighting machine. Instead, in Macbeth's soliloquies in Act I, Shakespeare reveals a character with a richly developed psychological interior, torn by conflicting impulses and struggling with a nascent conscience.

Whatever else one may say about the impact of Christianity on the warrior hero, it gives him psychological depth. The length, frequency, and convoluted syntax of Macbeth's soliloquies give him a complex interior that is lacking in any of Shakespeare's Romans. Even as thoughtful a character as Brutus, who at first is clearly troubled by the prospect of killing Caesar, is not anguished by his decision to do so. To be sure, Brutus pictures himself as undergoing a psychic civil war when trying to decide whether or not to kill Caesar, but he never experiences the kind of inner division that tears Macbeth apart. Indeed, once Brutus convinces himself that he is justified in killing Caesar, unlike Macbeth, he never once wavers in his resolve, nor does he suffer pangs of remorse or even regret after the deed. That is why Brutus is able to confront the ghost of Caesar as calmly as he does, whereas Macbeth is tormented by his visions of the murdered Duncan and Banquo. Despite his initial doubts, Brutus kills Caesar with a sense of moral conviction; by contrast, Macbeth must resolve to kill Duncan against his own moral scruples, and thus approaches the deed with a deeply divided soul. The complexity introduced into Macbeth's situation by the conflict between pagan and Christian principles in his soul is what makes him a profoundly tragic figure. A purely pagan Macbeth might have killed his king without any pangs of conscience; a purely Christian Macbeth might not have murdered Duncan at all; it is the combination of paganism and Christianity in Macbeth that produces his peculiar tragic situation as a murderer with a bad conscience.

Moreover, in analyzing Macbeth's “If it were done” soliloquy, we can see how Christianity has given him new desires and in fact transformed his ambition in a subtle but profound way. Although Macbeth appears to be rejecting “the life to come,” what he is really doing is trying to gain here in this life what Christianity promises to believers in the afterlife, a kind of absolute perfection, an infinite satisfaction. As he first reveals in this speech, Macbeth is questing for what I will call the Absolute Act, what he calls “the be-all and the end-all,” a single deed that will give him everything he desires and give it to him securely and forever. What gives him pause at this moment in Act I, scene vii is the consideration that no human act is entirely self-contained; every deed has consequences, and hence a misdeed may come back to haunt its perpetrator. Macbeth would have done well to heed his own warning, which turns out to characterize prophetically the course of his career in crime. But he cannot close his eyes to the tantalizing vision of the Absolute Act that will yield him complete and perfect happiness.

Thus Macbeth kills Duncan in expectation of gaining at one stroke all he desires, only to have his hopes thwarted, since once in power he finds himself exposed to a new sense of insecurity as a tyrant. But the futility of his quest for the Absolute Act does not lead Macbeth to abandon it; rather he tries to reformulate it. Instead of focusing on Duncan, he starts to think obsessively about Banquo, and concludes that the only obstacle standing between him and perfect happiness is his rival general: “There is none but he / Whose being I do fear” (III.i.53-54); hence “his death” would leave Macbeth “perfect” (III.i.107). In his obsession with the royal succession, we can see the concern for eternity Macbeth has absorbed from Christianity. What troubles him is
the thought that the Weird Sisters promised Banquo that he would found a “line of kings” (III.i.59). Macbeth cannot be content with having achieved his personal ambition of becoming king if it now appears to lead nowhere in the future:

Upon my head they plac'd a fruitless crown,  
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,  
Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal hand,  
No son of mine succeeding. If't be so,  
For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind,  
For them the gracious Duncan have I murther'd,  
Put rancors in the vessel of my peace  
Only for them, and mine eternal jewel  
Given to the common enemy of man,  
To make them kings—the seeds of Banquo kings!

(III.i.60-69)

In the most unchristian act of contemplating another murder, Macbeth thinks in Christian terms. He is tormented by the thought that he has given up his “eternal jewel” to the devil for the sake of Banquo's heirs, not his own. Once Macbeth has been told of the immortality of the soul, he cannot help conceiving of the issue of his happiness differently from the way a pagan hero like Achilles would. He comes to desire a perfection unimaginable to a pagan living in a world of finite horizons.

Having failed to satisfy his infinite desire by killing Duncan, Macbeth nevertheless feels that perfection is still within his grasp. All he has to do now is to have Banquo killed, together with his son Fleance. Shakespeare does not reveal the full extent of Macbeth's hopes until the second attempt at the Absolute Act goes awry. When the murderers are forced to report that, although Banquo is dead, Fleance escaped, Macbeth responds in despair:

Then comes my fit again. I had else been perfect,  
Whole as the marble, founded as the rock,  
As broad and general as the casing air;  
But now I am cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd, bound in  
To saucy doubts and fears.

(III.iv.20-24)

This speech provides the most forceful expression of Macbeth's all-or-nothing attitude. He is constantly searching for a kind of pure perfection, an analogue to Christian salvation; in its absence, he feels himself left with nothing, trapped in a form of damnation. The height of Macbeth's hopes is thus responsible for the depth of his despair. He desires something infinite (“as broad and general as the casing air”), but he discovers that every human act is finite, something is always left over, like Fleance, to provoke further consequences. Contrary to Macbeth's hopes, no single act can “trammel up” all the consequences and forestall the need for future action. Hence Macbeth's quest for perpetual satisfaction yields only perpetual dissatisfaction. As his wife painfully sums up his situation: “Nought's had, all's spent, / Where our desire is got without content” (III.ii.4-5), and she correctly diagnoses her husband's problem as an inability to live with “doubtful joy” (III.ii.7). Yet despite the mounting evidence of the failure of his quest for the Absolute Act, Macbeth allows himself to be drawn into a series of deeds that only succeed in damning him further. Even toward the end of his life, when his world seems to be crashing down around him, he still hopes for some kind of enduring happiness and is willing to risk everything on one last gamble to achieve perfection: “This push / Will cheer me ever, or disseat me now” (V.iii.20-21).

This analysis sheds light on what is probably Macbeth's most famous speech, his response to the news of his
wife's death:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(V.v.19-28)

Struck by the profound nihilism of this speech, some critics have wondered whether to attribute this attitude to Shakespeare himself. But Shakespeare is careful to place Macbeth's nihilism in a specific context. Given what we have seen of his all-or-nothing attitude, it is not surprising that the collapse of his quest for the Absolute Act should generate this glimpse into a nihilistic abyss. This speech is surely not an expression of Christian sentiments, and yet once again we see how even in opposition to Christianity Macbeth turns out to be influenced by it. When he speaks of "the last syllable of recorded time," he clearly is no longer thinking in pagan terms, but is rather haunted by the apocalyptic expectations of Christianity. Indeed in its feeling for time, this speech marks a turn from a pagan to a Christian outlook, as Macbeth learns to devalue this world from the standpoint of eternity.

What is characteristic of Macbeth's words in Act V, scene v is that he speaks of tomorrow and yesterday, but he has no thought for today. He has lost the pagan ability to take pleasure in the moment, to live happily in this world, without looking beyond its borders to eternity. Futurity has cast a shadow over his life, driving him to leave the past behind ("what's done, is done"; III.ii.12) and in the process poisoning the present for him. The key to the transformation of Macbeth's heroism is his reorientation toward the future, brought about by the intervention of the Weird Sisters in his world, who in some way stand for the impact of the supernatural on human life and hence the subversion of the natural. Recall that when we first hear of Macbeth in the play, he is "Disdaining Fortune" (I.ii.17). Like any good pagan warrior, at first he is not obsessed with the future but fights for the glory of the present moment, oblivious to the consequences for his safety. But by suggesting to Macbeth that there may be some providential order to events in this world, the Weird Sisters shake his faith in himself and in his own efforts, and awaken his longing to ally himself to whatever force in the universe represents the wave of the future. Lady Macbeth quickly picks up the same attitude: "Thy letters have transported me beyond / This ignorant present, and I feel now / The future in the instant" (I.v.56-58). For both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, the present moment becomes contemptible as soon as they think they can see beyond it confidently to a perfect future. Drawn inexorably into the future, Macbeth eventually sees all present moments voided of meaning, and, since in one basic sense life can be lived only in the present, this means that life itself loses all meaning for Macbeth. His contempt for the "brief candle" and the "poor player" who merely "struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more" is one last reflection of the disdain for the transitory he has absorbed from Christianity. Ultimately Shakespeare shows that Macbeth's nihilism is the obverse of a kind of religious faith; this world becomes worthless to him when it fails to live up to an otherworldly standard of absolute perfection.

To understand more fully how Macbeth comes to be governed by a demonic parody of a religious faith, we must analyze the role of the Weird Sisters in the play. Of course, on the face of it, as witches, they appear to represent an anti-Christian force within the world of Macbeth. But although as "instruments of darkness" (I.iii.124) the witches must be viewed as enemies of orthodox religion, the principles in which they in effect instruct Macbeth are at least in one respect indistinguishable from Christian beliefs. What the witches teach Macbeth is after all a lesson in providence. The providential order they represent may be demonic and lead
Macbeth to his damnation, but the fact remains that their prophecies embody for Macbeth a form of religious teaching, that earthly events are governed by higher powers.

As we have seen, Macbeth begins the play with the faith of a Homeric warrior—whether he succeeds in battle depends largely on whether he behaves bravely on the battlefield. But the Weird Sisters undermine Macbeth's belief that the outcome of his actions lies in his own hands, and teach him instead to rely on supernatural aid. As the play unfolds, Macbeth becomes increasingly hesitant to take the risks a hero normally accepts as a matter of course, and instead seeks guarantees from the witches that his success is assured because it is foreordained. One would expect that Macbeth's turn from heroic self-reliance to a faith in a providential order would lead him to act more virtuously in conventional moral terms. But in the paradoxical world of Macbeth, the hero's newfound faith in providence actually makes him crueler in his actions. As long as Macbeth believes that the outcome of single combat is a function chiefly of the behavior of the combatants, he acts nobly, as shown by the general admiration he initially evokes. But once Macbeth believes himself in league with hidden powers, he begins to act secretly himself, concealing his evil intentions behind false displays of good will (I.vii.82), working through proxies, and striking down opponents when they least expect it, rather than in honest open combat. Moreover, once Macbeth comes to believe that his victories are fated, he loses all restraint and becomes willing to do anything to achieve his goals, including murdering women and children. Macbeth develops a kind of fanaticism; he becomes so convinced that he is favored by providence that he comes to view his personal cause as universally valid (III.iv.134-35).

Thus the Weird Sisters, who seem to offer new power to Macbeth, in fact take away whatever power he originally possessed and turn him into a creature of their own ends. He thinks that providence is serving him, but in reality he ends up serving providence, or at least whatever order the witches represent. Macbeth's loss of freedom is reflected in the diminishing proportion of thought to deed that characterizes his behavior in the course of the play. As we have seen, at first a significant expansion and deepening of Macbeth's consciousness occurs. He agonizes over the decision to kill Duncan, running over in his mind all the moral objections to the deed. Speaking of meekness and pity with respect (I.vii.16-25), Macbeth comes closest to espousing genuine Christian principles in this speech. Even once he has killed Duncan, Macbeth cannot rest content with the deed or put it out of his mind. Although it may be inaccurate to speak of remorse in his case, he is clearly troubled by what he has done and convinced that he will never sleep peacefully again (II.ii.38-40). The way his conscience plays tricks on him, making him see visions and hear voices, is one more indication of his transformation from a purely pagan hero. His behavior provokes a reproach from his wife, who wants to see him act like an old-style warrior again: “You do unbend your noble strength, to think / So brain-sickly of things” (II.ii.42-43).

But the new interiority that has opened up in Macbeth eventually begins to close down under the pressure of events. To be sure, it is still evident when he is faced with the prospect of murdering Banquo. Shakespeare again gives Macbeth a long soliloquy before the deed, in which he reflects on why he must do it. And once Banquo has been killed, Macbeth's conscience wreaks havoc with his peace of mind, perhaps even producing the apparitions that haunt his banquet. Lady Macbeth once again tries to restore his heroic attitude by shaming him: “What? quite unmann'd in folly?” (III.iv.72). But Shakespeare introduces subtle variations into Macbeth's second murder, which suggest how his attitudes are changing. In considering the murder of Banquo, Macbeth dwells more on prudential than on moral considerations. Moreover, as he finishes his soliloquy, he has the potential murderers enter and indicates that they will be going matters they discussed the night before. It is thus clear that even before the soliloquy Macbeth had already reached the decision to kill Banquo. Unlike what happened in the case of Duncan, this time Macbeth's soliloquy merely confirms a choice he has already made. Furthermore, his decision to hire murderers to kill Banquo suggests that he is trying to distance himself from the deed and perhaps avoid the fits of conscience his murder of Duncan provoked (unsuccessfully as it turns out). Macbeth seems to be reacting against the moral scruples that go along with the opening up of interiority in his soul. As the banquet scene confirms, the warrior wishes he could return to an earlier state of affairs, when he was a simpler man and remained undisturbed by the prickings of conscience.
Thus at the end of Act III, scene iv, Macbeth proclaims: “Strange things I have in head, that will to hand, / Which must be acted ere they may be scann’d” (III.iv.138-39). Here we see Macbeth provoked into a willful contraction of his consciousness. Up to this point he has been characterized by the unusual amount of thought he gives to his deeds before acting (at least unusual for a warrior). Now he wishes to reverse this pattern: act first and then think about it. The new principle of interiority in his soul has clearly become painful to him, a burden from which he now wishes to escape. But the price Macbeth pays for this escape is his freedom. Reacting against the agonizing thought processes that have been going into his decisions, he starts to act mechanically, without thinking, and that means to act more brutally than ever before. The very fact that up to this point he has been deliberating at length about his deeds indicates that he has been free to act or not. But from this point on, he allows himself to be drawn into a pattern in which he reacts automatically to events, rather than planning them; thus he gradually surrenders his freedom of action.

When Macbeth is shaken by the news that Macduff has fled to England, he conceives the idea of what would today be called a pre-emptive strike: “Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits: / The flighty purpose never is o'ertook / Unless the deed go with it” (IV.i.144-46). This attitude follows from the Weird Sisters' success in increasingly convincing Macbeth that events in life are fated. If his destiny is already decided, then there is no point in Macbeth debating what is right or wrong for him to do; rather his one task becomes to try to figure out, with the aid of the witches, what is fated to happen next and act accordingly. Once he believes that he can have certain knowledge of the future, he comes to think that haste, and not due deliberation, will be the key to his success:

The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:
The castle of Macduff I will surprise,
Seize upon Fife, give to th' edge o' th' sword
His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool;
This deed I'll do before this purpose cool.
But no more sights!

(IV.i.146-55)

After debating at length killing both Duncan and Banquo, here Macbeth plunges precipitately into several murders, all of them crueler and more repugnant morally than his earlier deeds. But having had enough of moral scruples, Macbeth goes to the opposite extreme of unthinking action, which in this case leads him into indiscriminate violence.

One might be tempted to view this development as simply a return to pagan impulsiveness, an attempt to annual the new Christian principle of interiority. But lurking behind this speech is a model that cannot be traced to pagan sources. “To crown my thoughts with acts”—as several critics have noted, in this speech Macbeth is attempting to live out a dream of omnipotence. He fantasizes that he need only think something and it will instantaneously happen, a pattern fully embodied only in the Biblical God. Just as he has been attracted to the Christian idea of eternity, Macbeth feels the pull of the Christian idea of an omnipotent God, whose thoughts translate directly into actions. As part of the absolutism we have observed in Macbeth, he now covets the omnipotence of the Biblical God for himself. Reacting against his discovery of his vulnerability as a mortal, he goes to the opposite extreme of wishing to believe himself invulnerable, a desire which makes him fall prey to the Weird Sisters' schemes. Once he places himself entirely in their hands, he is able to overcome his unheroic sense of insecurity and in fact develops a remarkable faith in himself as unconquerable. Toward the end of the play, in a reversal of the way he is portrayed in the middle, Macbeth begins to sound conventionally heroic again: “The mind I sway by, and the heart I bear, / Shall never sag with doubt, nor shake with fear” (V.iii.9-10); he actually says: “I have almost forgot the taste of fears” (V.v.9). But
the irony is that Macbeth's sense of absolute power comes just before his experience of absolute powerlessness.58 Seeking to take total command of his world, he in fact quickly loses control of events, forced to watch his enemies seize the initiative, while he is reduced to waiting passively and reacting to their moves, precisely because of his faith in the witches' prophecies (V.iii.2-7). In the end, he even loses his freedom of movement: “They have tied me to a stake; I cannot fly, / But bear-like must fight the course” (V.vii.1-2).

As his speech in Act IV, scene i indicates, Macbeth repudiates thinking prior to acting in the hope of avoiding “more sights,” that is, he does not want to have to contemplate the moral consequences of his deeds. Thus his speech fulfills a wish that both he and his wife express earlier in the play—to be able to act without seeing, that is, without having to face up to the consequences of one's deeds.59 But the ultimate realization of this hope is Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking: “to receive at once the benefit of sleep and do the effects of watching!” (V.i.9-11). In Lady Macbeth we see literalized what happens metaphorically in her husband's case. He comes to sleepwalk through life, just going through the motions; his actions are provoked by his opponents' moves and lack any inner motive or meaning, even in his own eyes. The ultimate result of the deepening of Macbeth's consciousness is paradoxical—it leads him to act mechanically, without consciousness. As we have repeatedly seen, the opening up of Macbeth's consciousness causes a deep rift to develop in his soul, a painful division between what he wants to do and what his conscience tells him is morally right to do. Though for much of the play he wrestles with his new-found conscience, in the end he starts to repudiate it and all consciousness. Troubled by what he finds in the depths of his soul—“full of scorpions is my mind” (III.ii.36)—Macbeth searches for a way to heal the rift in his consciousness and “raze out the written troubles of the brain” (V.iii.42). But in seeking to extinguish consciousness, he leaves himself prey to the unconscious forces in his soul, which make him act more savagely than he ever did before. Chafing under the constraints of a new morality, he eventually repudiates all restraints on his actions, and becomes a slave to his basest desires. That is how his seemingly newfound freedom turns into a new form of slavery.

In examining the impact of the Weird Sisters on Macbeth's thinking, we have seen what he dimly suspects from the beginning and finally confirms to his horror— their effect is thoroughly ambiguous and equivocal. As Macbeth himself says: “This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill; cannot be good” (I.iii.130-31). It is of course notoriously difficult to pin down the exact role of the Weird Sisters in Macbeth. As the opponents of the legitimate Christian forces in the play, they seem to represent a link to the older pagan forces in Scotland, as was of course historically true of witches in medieval Europe. But in many respects the Weird Sisters seem to be aligned with the tendencies that are leading Macbeth out of the pagan world—they concretely represent the impact of the supernatural, and above all they lead him to believe in particular providence.

Ultimately it is as difficult to place the witches squarely in either the pagan or the Christian camp as it is to place Macbeth. As we have seen, Macbeth is a strange hybrid, neither fully pagan nor fully Christian, but torn between the two worlds, combining aspects of both. In his case, Christianity does not, as it usually does, temper the fierceness of the pagan spirit, but paradoxically inflames it. Supplying an absolutism to Macbeth's pagan spirit, Christianity—or rather his distorted interpretation of it—turns him into a crueler and more devious figure. Convinced of the inevitability of his triumph, he lets nothing stand in his way, becoming a demonic parody of the crusading Christian warrior and hence a fiend in the eyes of the genuine Christians in the play. One might think that a combination of classical and Christian principles would produce some kind of higher synthesis, incorporating the best of both worlds. But Macbeth himself suggests the difficulty of synthesizing antithetical qualities: “Who can be wise, amaz'd, temp'rate, and furious, / Loyal, and neutral in a moment?” (II.iii.108-9). If Macbeth achieves a kind of synthesis, he might be said to combine the worst of both worlds, pursuing pagan goals with a Christian absolutism or, alternatively phrased, pursuing Christian goals with a pagan ferocity.60

The witches are similarly hybrids, walking violations of any category one is tempted to impose on them.61 Macbeth may seem to deal in sharp and well-defined polarities: good versus evil, Christian versus pagan, male versus female, supernatural versus natural, and so on. But from their first appearance, the witches
work to break down any simple sense of binary opposition in the play: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (I.i.11). The way they violate fundamental category distinctions is the first thing Banquo notices about them: they “look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth, / And yet are on't” (I.iii.41-42). Above all, the witches seem to cloud the normally clear distinction between male and female: “You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so” (I.iii.45-47). The masculine/feminine dichotomy is unusually important in Macbeth, in part because it becomes aligned with the pagan/Christian opposition. The pagan heroic ideal is associated with a vision of manliness in battle, while Christianity is associated with a softer, sensitive, more feminine view of life. When Macbeth worries that the murderers have become too gospelled, he might as well have questioned whether they have become too feminized. As we have seen, the fact that they reply “We are men, my liege” (III.i.90) shows that they are aware that Macbeth is calling their manliness into question.

The issue of what it is to be a man is raised frequently in Macbeth—whether it involves acting solely like a male, true to the warrior's code of aggressive behavior, or whether the notion of manhood needs to be extended to encompass a feminine, sensitive side of human nature. Lady Macbeth is able to taunt her husband into murdering Duncan early in the play by appealing to a narrowly masculine conception of manhood and speaking with contempt for compassion (I.vii.39-59), thus treating him as he later does the murderers of Banquo. But toward the end of the play, when Malcolm tries similarly to goad Macduff into savage action, the older warrior stands up for a broader definition of manhood as compassionate humanity:

MALCOLM.

Dispute it like a man.

MACDUFF.

But I must also feel it as a man.

(IV.iii.220-21)

We see here how complicated the masculine/feminine dichotomy becomes in Macbeth. Far from constituting a simple, straightforward opposition in the play, the boundary between male and female is always on the verge of dissolving, creating new hybrid forms. One of the signs of Macbeth's disorientation as a warrior is the degree to which he allows himself to be influenced by female forces—the Weird Sisters, of course, but also his wife, who plays a major role in determining his course of action. But even as the masculine is being feminized in the play, the feminine is being masculinized. This tendency is evident in the beards of the witches, or in Lady Macbeth's various attempts to act the part of a male, most fully demonstrated in her famous speech in which she desires to be “unsexed” and to exchange her compassionate femininity for a cruel masculinity (I.v.40-50). One cannot simply equate the masculine with the pagan in Macbeth or the feminine with the Christian. Nevertheless, the recurrent images of sexual ambiguity in the play, most fully realized in the Weird Sisters, suggest the larger point I have been making about Shakespeare's attempt in Macbeth to portray a world that is a hybrid of pagan and Christian elements.

One final aspect of the Weird Sisters' impact on Macbeth remains to be considered: the way they change his view of nature. As he is drawn into the world of what Lady Macbeth calls “metaphysical aid” (I.v.29), his increasing obsession with supernatural forces leads him to develop a contempt and even hatred for the world of nature. In part, this development reflects the fact that Macbeth's desire for the infinite leads him to despise anything merely finite in the world, and hence ultimately the natural world itself. Shakespeare establishes a connection between Macbeth's desire for the infinite and his tyrannical nature. In the long exchange between Malcolm and Macduff concerning the character of the tyrant, infinite desire emerges as his distinguishing trait: “Boundless intemperance / In nature is a tyranny” (IV.iii.66-67). Testing Macduff by pretending to be a
tyrant, Malcolm accuses himself of “stanchless avarice,” indeed an insatiable desire for wealth: “my more-having would be as a sauce / To make me hunger more” (IV.iii.78, 81-82). He also presents himself as lecherous, and claims that his lust would brook no restraints:

but there's no bottom, none,
In my voluptuousness. Your wives, your daughters,
Your matrons, and your maids could not fill up
The cistern of my lust, and my desire
All continent impediments would o'erbear
That did oppose my will.

(IV.iii.60-65)

As Shakespeare presents the tyrannical character, his infinite desire makes him fight against any limits set to his will. Thus the tyrant ultimately finds himself at war with nature itself, since the very idea of a natural order is that things have natures which define their behavior, thus setting limits to their actions. Macbeth seems characteristically to long for the moment when “Nature seems dead” (II.i.50).

As Macbeth plunges deeper and deeper into tyranny, Shakespeare reveals the titanic egotism that fuels the tyrant's actions: “But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer, / Ere we will eat our meal in fear” (III.ii.16-17); “For mine own good / All causes shall give way” (III.iv.134-35). Ultimately Macbeth's tyrannical ego leads him to challenge all the forces of nature and even the natural order itself:

Though you untie the winds, and let them fight
Against the churches; though the yesty waves
Confound and swallow navigation up;
Though the bladed corn be lodg'd, and trees blown down;
Though castles topple on their warders' heads;
Though palaces and pyramids do slope
Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure
Of nature's germains tumble all together,
Even till destruction sicken; answer me
To what I ask you.

(IV.i.52-61)

This passage provides a profound insight into the character of Macbeth's soul and his tyrannical desires. His imagination leaps to picturing the dissolution of all order in nature, and that means particularly the dissolution of all natural boundaries. Macbeth's tyrannical soul cannot stand the way nature sets limits to all activity and especially to human desire. He would rather see the world in chaos than accept natural constraints on his will. Ultimately he rejects the idea that there can be any kind of order subsisting in nature, independent of human will. That explains his attraction to the idea of a supernatural order, the notion that what happens in the world is always the product of some will, even if it must be a sinister one. The more Macbeth feels in league with supernatural forces, the more tempted he is to look down upon the world of nature and view it as justifiably subject to his own will, destined to serve his purposes and his purposes alone.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Macbeth's speech is his curse on “nature's germains,” the seeds out of which all the world of nature springs. He despises the generative power of nature, its fecundity. Ultimately Macbeth turns out to be at war with natural generation. It is no accident that his most horrible crime is the murder of Macduff's wife and children. But there is a profound irony in Macbeth's attack on the children of Scotland—his own marriage appears to be barren, thus leaving him without the heirs he needs to perpetuate his line and hence his achievement. Even the tyrant cannot dispense with the power of nature, for he needs it to generate an heir. Early in the play Lady Macbeth unnaturally tries to deny her role as a woman (I.v.40-50) and in particular lays a curse on her natural potential as a mother (I.vii.54-59). Shakespeare seems to be
establishing a pattern in which those who curse natural powers will live to regret it, for nature will come back
to take its revenge. Having tried to deny the womanly side of her nature, Lady Macbeth finds herself unequal
to the aggressively masculine role she tries to play and her mind snaps in the process.

In Act V, Shakespeare brings in a Doctor of Physic to treat Lady Macbeth. Perhaps he was aware that the root
of physician is physis, the Greek word for nature (related to the Greek word for plant and thus emphasizing
nature as a generative power). The doctor diagnoses Lady Macbeth's problem as “a great perturbation in
nature” (V.i.9) and supplies a formula for the fate of both Macbeth and his wife: “Unnatural deeds / Do breed
unnatural troubles” (V.i.71-72). The doctor suggests that, having turned against the natural order, Lady
Macbeth can be helped now only by supernatural forces: “More needs she the divine than the physician”
(V.i.74). Faced with the doctor's failure to cure his wife, Macbeth expresses his contempt for medicine:
“Throw physic to the dogs, I'll none of it” (V.iii.47). Macbeth's rejection of the physician is consistent with
the rejection of nature that has informed his whole career as a tyrant.

And yet in his attempt to reject the natural and embrace the supernatural, Macbeth turns out to be profoundly
confused. The Weird Sisters prey upon his confusion in order to instill a false sense of security in him and
lead him to his destruction. The riddling prophecies with which they deceive him build his confidence only
because of his lingering faith in the power of the natural order. The prophecies suggest that Macbeth can be
overthrown only by powers beyond the natural order, such as a man not born of woman. When Macbeth hears
that he cannot be defeated “until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him”
(IV.i.92-94), his reaction depends on his belief in the limits of the natural world:

Who can impress the forest, bid the tree
Unfix his earth-bound root? Sweet bodements! good!
Rebellious dead, rise never till the wood
Of Birnam rise, and our high-plac'd Macbeth
Shall live the lease of nature.

(IV.i.94-99)

We see here how truly egotistical Macbeth has become. He expects everybody and everything to be bound by
the order of nature with one exception: Macbeth himself. As the last line in the passage shows, he is relying
on the power of nature at just the moment when he conceives himself to be raised above it. To see how
inconsistent his thinking has become, one need only note that here he is rejecting the possibility of
resurrection that only two scenes earlier he himself had contemplated. Macbeth has become totally confused
in sorting out the natural and the supernatural in his world. Having demanded to be above the limits of nature
himself, he forgets that someone else might achieve the same power.

In the end it is purely natural forces that destroy Macbeth, even though the conclusion of the play is
surrounded by a supernatural aura. The prophecies suggest that only mysteriously supernatural powers could
defeat Macbeth, but in the event the forces that triumph have simple natural explanations. The man not born
of woman turns out to be simply the product of a Caesarean section. And the miraculously moving forest turns
out to be nothing more than a camouflaging maneuver. Having attacked the natural order, Macbeth finds
himself ultimately defeated by it. And the deepest irony is that the Weird Sisters did not conceal his fate from
him. As several critics have noted, the prophetic apparitions come with their own explanations. The
prophecy concerning the man not born of woman is delivered by a bloody child, suggesting a Caesarean
section, and the prophecy concerning Birnam wood is delivered by a child with a tree in his hand, suggesting
the exact manner of Malcolm's later stratagem. Macbeth's problem is that he does not look carefully enough at
what the Weird Sisters show him; he only listens to what he hears and interprets the prophecies in light of his
own desires, above all, his wish to be invulnerable and omnipotent.
Earlier in the play, when Macbeth sees the apparition of the dagger, he says: “Mine eyes are made the fools o' th' other senses, / Or else worth all the rest” (II.i.44-45). This disjunction between sight and the other senses forms an important pattern in the play. Had Macbeth followed the advice of his eyes in this scene, he might have been spared destruction. His experience with the witches' apparitions suggests even more strongly that he would have been better off trusting what he saw with his own eyes, rather than allowing himself to be tricked into interpreting the revelations in light of his own hopes and desires. The ultimate trick the Weird Sisters play on Macbeth is to make him think that he is seeing with his own eyes when in fact he is interpreting what he sees in light of what he hears from the witches and their apparitions. As Macbeth finally comes to understand, the Weird Sisters only “keep the word of promise to our ear” (V.viii.21); perhaps the ultimate lesson Macbeth ought to learn is the difference between hearsay and seeing with one's own eyes.  

One might sum up the Weird Sisters' strategy this way: awakening Macbeth's infinite desire and appealing to his dream of omnipotence, they make him long for a supernatural alliance and breed a contempt for the natural world in him. Thus they blind him to the power of nature, which eventually destroys him.

No interpretation will ever seem fully adequate to the mysteries and paradoxes of Macbeth. But I have tried to show that the strangeness of Macbeth, the many riddles that have puzzled critics of the play, can in part be traced to the peculiar situation of its hero. Macbeth is in the odd position of a heroic warrior whose ambitions have been redefined and redirected along lines suggested to him by the Christian influences in his world. Faced with the Christian critique of the transitoriness of pagan values, Macbeth can no longer settle for the kind of glory that satisfied Achilles and all those Roman fools. In particular, under the influence of the Christian idea of eternity, Macbeth feels a need for something absolute in his life, something absolutely secure and absolutely lasting. Transposed into a world with the expanded horizons of Christianity, he finds a desire for the infinite awakening within his soul, which Shakespeare links with Macbeth's new form of tyranny and his new attitude toward nature as subject to human will. If one were to analyze fully Shakespeare's portrait of the transformation of the pagan hero into the tyrant of infinite desire, one would see that he was prophetically looking to the future; the tragedy of the Scottish warrior prefigures the tragedy of modernity. Indeed, if Macbeth could have found a way to translate his personal hopes for heaven on earth into a political program, into what we would call an ideology, he might well have served as the prototype of the distinctively modern tyrant.

Notes

1. All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from G. Blakemore Evans, ed., The Riverside Shakespeare (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). The original version of this essay was given as a lecture at the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation in Munich on November 28, 1991. An expanded version was published in German translation under the title “Macbeth und die Evangelisierung von Schottland” by the Siemens Foundation in 1993 (translated by Anke Heimann and edited by Heinrich Meier). I want to thank Dr. Meier for the opportunity to lecture in Munich and for the original publication of this Macbeth essay in book form. A significantly revised version of this text appeared in English in Interpretation, 24 (1997): 287-318. I have revised the essay further for republication in this volume.

2. According to the concordances, this is the only appearance of the word gospell'd in all of Shakespeare.


7. See also III.i.26-34.


11. See Bob Stewart, Macbeth: Scotland's Warrior King (Dorset, UK: Firebird Books, 1988) on the historical Scotland of Macbeth: “Elements of this pagan quality to kingship remained in eleventh century Scotland, which had a curious mixture of Christian and pre-Christian beliefs and practices” (p. 13).

12. Holinshed speaks of Duncan’s “small skill in warlike affaires” (Bullough, p. 490).


14. Here Shakespeare departs from his sources to sharpen the contrast. At one point Holinshed writes of Duncan: “he set all slouthfull and lingering delaies apart, and began to assemble an armie in most speedie wise, like a verie valiant capteine: for oftentimes it happeneth, that a dull coward and slouthfull person, constreined by necessitie, becommeth verie hardie and active. … the king himselfe governed in the maine battell or middle ward” (Bullough, p. 492).


17. For a contrary view of Duncan's policy, see Lowenthal, pp. 321-23. Turner, pp. 125-31, also develops a positive view of Duncan's kingship.


19. For a good discussion of this passage, see Lowenthal, p. 331.


21. Although clearly Shakespeare derived his sense of Macbeth's cruelty from Holinshed, the idea of giving it a specifically anti-Christian inflection seems to be Shakespeare's own. At one point in Holinshed's account of Macbeth, he writes that “he also applied his whole indevor, to cause young men to exercise themselves in vertuous maners, and men of the church to attend their divine service according to their vocations” (Bullough, pp. 497-98). This passage comes from a section in Holinshed about a period of ten years during which Macbeth ruled Scotland justly and well, a part of the story Shakespeare chose to suppress. In general, Shakespeare found a confused mixture of pagan and Christian elements in Holinshed's account of Macbeth and Scotland; the playwright worked to sharpen and develop the contrast.


23. Macbeth also appears to be returning to Shakespeare's Henry VI plays in the way it considers the influence of women on politics, and especially the question of witches, as originally embodied in the
figure of Joan de Pucelle.

24. On the historical Malcolm's "gradual but almost total anglicising of the country and its methods of government," see Stewart, p. 30. The importance of the transformation of thanes into earls is suggested by a passage in Hector Boetius's *The Description of Scotland* (which may well be one of Shakespeare's sources for *Macbeth*, since Holinshed included it as a preface to his history of Scotland). Boetius discusses the decline of the virtue of the Scots as they came to imitate the English, specifically in their handling of aristocratic titles: "Furthermore as men not walking in the right path, we began to follow also the vaine shadow of the Germane honor and titles of nobilitie, and boasting of the same after the English maner, it fell out yer long, that whereas he in times past was accompted onlie honorable, which excelled other men not in riches and possessions, but in prowesse and manhood, now he would be taken most glorious that went loaden with most titles, whereof it came to pass, that some were named dukes, some earles, some lords, some barons, in which vaine pusses they fixed all their felicitie. Before time the noble men of Scotland were of one condition, & called by the name of Thanes … and this denomination was giuen vnto them after their desert and merit." See Vernon Snow, ed., *Holinshed's Chronicles: England, Scotland and Ireland* (rpt. New York: AMS, 1965; London: J. Johnson, 1807-8), Vol. V, p. 26. For a discussion of this passage, see Turner, pp. 123-24. As Turner points out, this passage in Boetius sheds a new light on the end of *Macbeth*, suggesting something negative about Malcolm's renaming of the Scottish thanes as earls. In general, Boetius's *Description* may have contributed to Shakespeare's fundamental conception of *Macbeth*. As if he were a sixteenth-century Walter Scott, Boetius contrasts a primitive and barbaric but austere and heroic Scotland with a civilized and sophisticated but overrefined and effete England.

25. Turner, p. 143, aptly characterizes Macbeth as "the heroic destroyer of a heroic age."

26. In a late exchange with Macduff, Malcolm indicates that he is at least aware of what a remarkable combination of virtues a true king must possess, in particular a synthesis of "mercy" and "lowliness" with "courage" and "fortitude." See IV.iii.93-94. For helpful discussions of Malcolm's role in the play, see Lowenthal, pp. 353-54 and Turner, pp. 144-45.


29. On the importance of this passage, see Bradshaw, pp. 219-20 and Davis, pp. 219, 223.

30. On the "epic rhetoric" of Lii, see Bullough, p. 426.


32. For analysis of the complexity of this moment, see Bradshaw, p. 221, and James L. O'Rourke, "The Subversive Metaphysics of Macbeth," *Shakespeare Studies*, 21 (1993): 223-24.


34. For a general discussion of this theme in epic literature, see W. T. H. Jackson, *The Hero and the King: An Epic Theme* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). That Shakespeare may indeed have had Agamemnon specifically in mind when writing *Macbeth* is suggested by the fact that critics have found a number of verbal echoes in the play of John Studley's 1566 English translation of Seneca's *Agamemnon*. See Bullough, p. 452: "This tragedy of Seneca's seems especially to have seized on Shakespeare's imagination." The most remarkable of these verbal parallels can be found in the Act I Chorus of Studley's *Agamemnon*: "One hurlye burlye done, another doth begin" (Bullough, p. 523—Cf. *Macbeth*, I.i.3).
35. See Lowenthal's parallel formulation: “It is disconcerting to realize that Macbeth's Christian belief helps worsen his tyranny” (p. 348).

36. The phenomenon of religious wars, and especially the Crusades, shows that Christianity is not simply antithetical to the warlike spirit and may in fact be combined with it. Shakespeare explores the strange ways in which religion may supply motives for warfare throughout his history plays, especially in *Henry V*.


38. The contrast between Macbeth and Achilles may seem to be blurred by the Greek hero's appearance in the underworld in the *Odyssey*, which would seem to undermine the distinction between pagan thisworldliness and Christian otherworldliness. But the afterlife Homer portrays is a pale shadow of this life, not a higher state as in the Christian vision. Far from being desirable, the afterlife in the *Odyssey* is so close to non-existence that Achilles says that he would rather be a slave on earth than rule in the underworld. As Achilles' case shows, unlike the Christian hero, the pagan hero does not take his bearings from the afterlife. When in this life, the Christian hero thinks longingly ahead to the afterlife; even when in the afterlife, the pagan hero thinks longingly back to this life.


41. See Bradshaw's formulation: “Shakespeare's Macbeth is still the terrifying warrior—but a warrior with an intensely moral imagination” (p. 250).

42. See Bradshaw, p. 252: “The ‘Christian’, decidedly unclassical and unSenecan, character of *Macbeth* appears in its terrors, rather than in certitudes or assurances, and corresponds with that sense of the psyche as something stratified, vertiginous, which [Erich] Auerbach analyses in Augustine.” See also p. 255: “Shakespeare has … sunk himself into the mindfalls of Macbeth's anguish'd imagination. … We are … intimately involved in the inner workings and processes of Macbeth's thought and feeling; and that difference corresponds with Auerbach's distinction between classical and Christian modes of feeling.”

43. See *Julius Caesar*, II.i.61-69.

44. One can grasp the difference between Macbeth and Brutus in the opening of their soliloquies. Whereas Brutus begins with the straightforward: “It must be by his death” (II.i.10), Macbeth immediately gets twisted up in the convoluted: “If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly” (I.vii.1-2). I discuss the distinctive nature of the soliloquies in the Roman plays in *Shakespeare's Rome*, pp. 113-16.

45. See Maynard Mack's formulation in *Everybody's Shakespeare: Reflections Chiefly on the Tragedies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 194: “Macbeth and his wife seek to make hereafter now, to wrench the future into the present by main force, to master time.”

46. The best discussion I have seen of this pattern in *Macbeth* is to be found in Gordon Braden, “Senecan Tragedy and the Renaissance,” *Illinois Classical Studies*, 9 (1984), 287-88. See also Terence Eagleton, *Shakespeare and Society: Critical Studies in Shakespearean Drama* (New York: Shocken, 1967), pp. 130-32. The use of the term Absolute may sound anachronistic in a discussion of Shakespeare, as if he were some kind of Elizabethan Hegel. But in fact Shakespeare does use the word absolute three times in *Macbeth* (I.iv.14, III.vi.40, IV.iii.38), and with something of the force the word was to acquire in German Idealism. Indeed, much of what I am arguing about *Macbeth* is contained in the movement it portrays between “absolute trust” (I.iv.14) and “absolute fear” (IV.iii.38).
47. Macbeth's speech offers an interesting parallel to Hamlet's lines: “O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space—were it not that I have bad dreams” (II.ii.254-56). As different as Hamlet and Macbeth are, they share the all-or-nothing attitude I have been discussing. See my *Hamlet* book, pp. 50-52. For a provocative discussion of parallels between Hamlet and Macbeth, see Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), Vol. II, pp. 110-111.

48. Macbeth's all-or-nothing attitude apparently even infects the murderers of Banquo, one of whom describes himself as: “So weary with disasters, tugg'd with fortune, / That I would set my life on any chance, / To mend it, or be rid on't” (III.i.111-13).

49. See also Macbeth's mention of the “crack of doom” at IV.i. 117. For the importance of the apocalyptic mode in *Macbeth*, see States, especially his characterization of Macbeth as “an apocalyptic personality: a man obsessed by finality, by absolutes, and by his bondage to time” (p. 58). See also White, p. 154.


51. “In a play which, from the premises of the plot, is Future-driven, Macbeth, especially, is one who cannot be in his Present.” See Francis Berry, *Poet's Grammar: Person, Time and Mood in Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 53. This brief essay on “*Macbeth*: Tense and Mood” provides an insightful analysis of how Macbeth's distinctive sense of time is reflected in the grammar of the play. See also Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea*, pp. 270 and 279.

52. An analogue of this aspect of Macbeth's tragedy is provided by the Porter in his paradoxical tale of “a farmer, that hang'd himself on th' expectation of plenty” (II.iii.4-5).

53. Similarly, when Macbeth first hears the witches' prophecies, he seems willing to accept the chanciness of the world order: “If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir” (Liii.143-44).

54. On this point, see Mack, p. 192.


57. See, for example, Kirsch, pp. 94-95, and Turner, p. 138.

58. Cf. Turner's formulation about *Macbeth*: “the magical sense of omnipotence is haunted by its fellow-contrary nightmare of impotence” (p. 141).

59. MACBETH.

Stars, hide your fires,

Let not light see my black and deep desires;

The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be

Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

(I.iv.50-53)

LADY Macbeth.

And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes.
In both passages, the characters unconsciously reveal what they will in fact do, namely act blindly—act without fully realizing the consequences of their deeds.

60. For the idea that a synthesis of classical and Biblical morality might produce an ethic very different from either, see Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* (New York: Free Press, 1991), p. 191.

61. On this point, see Lowenthal, p. 354.

62. For a thorough discussion of this issue, see José Benardete's essay.

63. In this context, Lady Macbeth's line about Banquo and Fleance is suggestive: “But in them nature's copy's not eterne” (III.ii.38). Nature lacks eternity; like the pagan hero, nature appears defective in Macbeth's eyes when judged by the standard of eternity.

64. There are interesting parallels here to Plato's presentation of the tyrannical soul in the *Republic*; see especially 571a to 580a. The central parallel is the idea that in seeking to liberate his appetites, the tyrant becomes a slave to the force of desire in his soul. For a discussion of these parallels, see White, especially p. 145.

65. On this point, see Davis, p. 226.


69. See C. S. Lewis' formulation of a similar point in a different context: “At the moment, then, of Man's victory over Nature, we find the whole human race subjected to some individual men, and those individuals subjected to that in themselves which is purely ‘natural’—to their irrational impulses. … Man's conquest of Nature turns out, in the moment of its consummation, to be Nature's conquest of Man.” See *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 76.

**Criticism: Character Studies: Piotr Sadowski (essay date 2001)**


*In the following excerpt, Sadowski asserts that the “masculine principle” is a crucial agent in Macbeth's progression from “statism,” wherein he is concerned with honor and conscience, to a state of “endodynamism,” wherein he becomes preoccupied with remorseless ambition and the consolidation of power.*

According to the working definition adopted in the previous chapter, tragedy as a literary mode describes events leading towards an irreversible disturbance of the protagonist's functional equilibrium, often realized in death, or at least to a permanent maladaptation in the form of his or her total alienation from social relations. The critic Bernard McElroy calls this maladaptation “the complete disorientation of the individual from his most basic assumptions about himself and the world around him.” Literary plots of this type are most likely to be generated by situations characterized by excessive competitiveness and the accompanying violence—both masculine, endodynamic features, as distinct from acceptance and love—features usually associated with the feminine Eros as the principle of relatedness. Such an understanding of the tragic mode in terms of gender and dynamism of character is fully borne out by the nature of events in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Here the predominance and extremity of the masculine principle, both in relation to male and female
characters, account for the strong dynamic imbalance, which leads to a complete disintegration of the social relations involving the main protagonists, and to a serious crisis of the socio-political system.

This darkest and most sinister of Shakespeare’s tragedies begins ominously with the magic evocation of thunder, lightning, and rain, the awesome atmospheric phenomena traditionally associated with masculinity and with the power of male, uranic gods. Even the fact that the incantation is pronounced by the female witches takes nothing away from the masculine principle in its most gruesome and violent aspect. Ostensibly women, the witches talk of the “hurlyburly” of battle, of worldly power and its inevitable ruin, in their confused gender creating “a murky atmosphere of blurred distinctions, mingled opposites, equivocations, and reversals.” The feminine principle signaled by their sex is entirely obliterated by the dark powers of masculine magic of violence, of confusion and chaos, where “fair is foul, and foul is fair,” and things “hover through the fog and filthy air” (1.1.11-12). Even the witches’ physical appearance, wild and otherworldly (1.3.40-1), belies their female sex, causing confusion and apprehension in the manly Banquo: “you should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so” (45-7). The witches’ cauldron, this hell-broth betokening chaos and destruction, is an antithesis of the fertile female womb, producing poison and death instead of health and new life. In the opening scene therefore the feminine principle undergoes gender transformation into its opposite, setting the pattern, which culminates in the sinister figure of Lady Macbeth, of gender and moral inversion and confusion, where “nothing is, but what is not” (1.3.142).

Masculine violence materializes in all its gory terror in the second scene with a blunt question “What bloody man is that?” (1.2.1). The question is followed by a realistic if exaggerated report of the battle, full of upbeat military rhetoric of manly courage of the victors and the villainy of the traitors. It is in this context of unmitigated violence that the “brave Macbeth” is mentioned for the first time. He is highly regarded by fellow soldiers for hisundaunted courage, fighting skills, and spectacular efficacy in battle, and is now publicly glorified in Homeric terms as an eagle, a lion, “Valor’s minion” and “Bellona’s bridegroom.” Valor in fighting for the just cause is a static virtue, and such is the opinion that the “valiant cousin” Macbeth enjoys in King Duncan’s eyes. Macbeth’s efficaciousness receives due praise because it helped to win the battle, but Macbeth’s unceremonious killing of the traitor Macdonwald, with whom he “ne’er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him” (1.2.21), signals an endostatic character of someone prepared to break the accepted rules if necessary. Macbeth’s potentially dangerous endostatism is still unsuspected by others, who regard him as a “worthy gentleman,” that is, a static man of honor. Macbeth’s aspirations are further suggested by a comparison and by an unintentional identification with the traitorous Thane of Cawdor, whose title Macbeth now assumes as an immediate reward for his spectacular performance in battle (1.2.67-8). In dynamic terms, Macbeth’s promotion from the Thane of Glamis to the Thane of Cawdor marks his transition from honest, honorable statism to potentially disloyal and self-serving endostatism.

The particular nature of Macbeth’s dilemma has occasioned a considerable debate in the critical history of the play, caused by what the critics perceived as an inconsistency in Shakespeare’s characterization of the figure:
how could a man fully aware of the horror of his deeds be able to commit them? The critics did not deny Macbeth his deep moral sense, noting at the same time his ability to overcome his scruples, to commit one atrocious deed after another, and to live with guilty conscience. A. C. Bradley found in the play “the most remarkable exhibition of the [psychological] development of a character to be found in Shakespeare's tragedies,” but later critics accepted the view that Shakespeare sacrificed psychological consistency to theatrical effect. For example, according to J. I. M. Stewart, “for the sake of theatrical excitement the gap between character and action has been widened beyond credibility,” and “there is something like a deliberate omitting of clear and sufficient motives for action, there is a lack of discernible correspondence between the man and his deed.” In his analysis Stewart talks in fact about two Macbeths: the criminal and the hero.

Kenneth Muir too concluded that “Shakespeare was not so much concerned with the creation of real human beings, but with theatrical or poetical effect,” and that the playwright was “fascinated by the very difficulty of making the psychologically improbable … appear possible.” In his characterization of Macbeth, it has been argued, Shakespeare made the bold experiment of mixing mutually exclusive qualities—a brave warrior who is a moral coward, and a brutal murderer who is racked by feelings of guilt. I would argue, however, that rather than sacrificing psychological realism for artistic effect Shakespeare achieved both. What the critics perceived as an inconsistency is in fact a classic endostatic dilemma of a man whose “conscious or reflective mind … moves chiefly among considerations of outward success and failure, while his inner being is convulsed by conscience,” as was perceived intuitively by Bradley.

From the dynamic perspective, a state identified as dilemma occurs when an individual finds himself in a transitional state between two dynamic stages: between exodynamism and statism (exostatism), or between statism and endodynamism (endostatism). For example, the exostatic Hamlet is pulled in opposite directions by his exodynamic tendency to indulge his imagination, to play act, to brood and meditate, and by his static concern for justice, honor, and revenge. He is too much of an exodynamic to avoid thinking “too precisely on the event” and unpacking his heart with words, and at the same time he is too much of a static not to recriminate himself for neglecting his filial duty. The result is suspended decision, inaction, procrastination, and continuous self-reproaching. The endostatic Macbeth on the other hand is pulled in opposite directions by his static preoccupation with honor, conscience, and loyalty, and by his endodynamic tendency to act efficiently to achieve a profitable result, here to seize the crown. As Bernard McElroy put it: “the conscience-stricken criminals are in the agonizing position of being committed by their actions to one set of values while committed by their beliefs to quite another.” The result for Macbeth is a short period of indecision and suspension between scruples and ambition, until his endodynamic wife sways him towards decisive action. On the other hand, just as transitional dynamic types (exostatics and endostatics) have dilemmas, so statics have crises, that is, situations of painful choice between two irreconcilable alternatives in which a static person equally believes. This is a situation of Othello, caught tragically between his love for Desdemona and a belief that she is unfaithful, or of Brutus, for whom the plan to assassinate Caesar involves a painful choice between the sacrilege of regicide and the public interest of ridding the state of possible tyranny. Finally, the dynamic characters, that is, exodynamics and endodynamics, have neither dilemmas nor crises but problems of how to achieve what they want: pleasure in the case of exodynamics and power in the case of endodynamics.

The dilemma of being caught between static loyalty and endodynamic thirst for power is borne out by Macbeth's introspective asides and by his indecision, until Lady Macbeth tips the scales in favor of manly action. The progression of social success and power promised by the prophesy appealed to Macbeth's already existing endodynamic appetites, and as basically an endostatic man of action he cannot resist the challenge to reach for the highest reward. Especially now that the victorious battle brought him promotion and raised him nearer the king than he was ever before. Accordingly, his soliloquies from Act I mark a progression from the domination of static scruples over the possibilities which Macbeth is still afraid even to verbalize, to the disappearance of the voice of conscience after Macbeth's endostatic character suppresses the uncomfortable thoughts, for a time at least, under his wife's influence. The terrible possibility first enters Macbeth's consciousness only as a suggestion,
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murther is yet but fantastical,
Shakes to my single state of man,
That function is smother'd in surmise,
And nothing is, but what is not

(1.3.135-42)

At this stage the very “thought” of breaking the fundamental ethical laws can shake his moral sense profoundly, but it still stops him from acting upon the “horrible imaginings,” his “function” still “smother'd in surmise.” Macbeth's first soliloquy ends with a victory of static scruples over endodynamic ambition, and with a stoic resignation to leave the matter to fate: “If Chance will have me King, why, Chance may crown me, / Without my stir” (144-5). He is still addressed by Banquo as “worthy Macbeth,” and when he suggests to his companion that they “speak [their] free hearts each to other” (155-6), Macbeth means as yet no subterfuge.

But the full realization of Macbeth's endostatic tendency moves inexorably forward. By a stroke of dramatic irony, Macbeth's earlier identification with the traitorous Thane of Cawdor soon reveals a contrast between the two characters, to Macbeth's moral disadvantage. The report of the execution of “that most disloyal traitor” testifies in fact to the static character of Cawdor, who

very frankly ... confess'd his treasons,
Implor'd your Highness' pardon, and set forth
A deep repentance. Nothing in his life
Became him like the leaving it: he died
As one that had been studied in his death,
To throw away the dearest thing he ow'd,
As 'twere a careless trifle

(1.4.5-11)

First perceived as an endostatic traitor Cawdor thus turns out to be a misled static, while Macbeth, thought to be honest by the gullible Duncan, turns out to be a much more dangerous traitor, whose own ignoble death at the end of the play contrasts sharply with Cawdor's dignified departure. The static Duncan in turn is, like Othello, “trust incarnate,” whose main concern is the fair settlement of his accounts with the “worthiest cousin” to whom he owes victory in battle. Hence Duncan's genuinely apologetic rhetoric of “the sin of my ingratitude,” “recompense,” “the proportion both of thanks and payment,” “thy due,” and “pay.” This androgynous icon of regal dignity and justice, “the sacred embodiment of his country's life needing a reverent and tender protectiveness,” combines in himself the attributes of both father and mother. Duncan is the center of authority, the source of lineage and honor, but he is also the source of all nurturance, planting his children to his throne and making them grow. He also extends this “gardening” function to his cousin Macbeth: “I have begun to plant thee, and will labour / To make thee full of growing” (1.4.28-9). Tragically misled by appearances, he identifies Macbeth's castle as an idyllic place promising comfort and safety (“the air / Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself / Unto our gentle senses,” 1.6.1-3). This illusion is also shared by the unsuspecting Banquo, who finds the air “delicate” and compares the castle to the fertile “procreant cradle” where the birds “most breed and haunt” (8-9). As an androgynous nourishing father concerned with the well being of his large family, Duncan stands in symbolic opposition to the female characters: the witches with their poisonous cauldron and the childless and murderous Lady Macbeth, as well as to Macbeth's “barren scepter.”

Every next event stirs more and more Macbeth's awakened ambition and the endostatic urge to act. Duncan's
official appointment of the eldest son Malcolm as his successor causes Macbeth's resentment, and for the first time the “black and deep desires” give rise to the thought of the deed itself: “yet let that be, / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see” (1.4.52-3). In this spirit Macbeth writes a letter to his wife about the witches’ prophesy. It is not immediately clear why he should write to his wife at all, because the object of the letter is clearly not to inform her about the coming of Duncan to their castle, and Macbeth himself takes his early leave of the king to return to Inverness to make the necessary preparations. His ostensible reason is to let his “dearest partner of greatness” know about their good fortune as quickly as possible, so that she might not “lose the dues of rejoicing, by being ignorant of what greatness is promis'd” her. However, Macbeth's real albeit unconscious reason is to give his wife more time to strengthen her resolve on the right course of action, and to decide the matter for him. The almost child-like openness and frankness of the letter betrays a character who, notwithstanding his manliness, is still psychologically dependent on his wife. This would indicate a configuration of consecutive genders with its mixture of adoration and submission in the more feminine partner, and protection and domination in the more masculine partner, who in this case happens to be Lady Macbeth, the endodynamic masculine woman.

Her immediate resolve, so different from her husband's vacillation, resounds in the unshaken confidence with which she echoes the witches’ prophesy, and confirms the progression of Macbeth's fortune as if it was already a fait accompli: “Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be / What thou art promis'd” (1.5.15-6). Where the endostatic Macbeth experiences a paralyzing moral dilemma, for his endynamic wife the choice does not even exist: the crown must be seized and the only problem is how to do it. “Macbeth has a divided mind about some of the most fundamental issues of existence; Lady Macbeth is the voice of one side of it.” In this sense the spouses complement and need each other: she is most self-assured and able to take a firm decision when Macbeth's nerve is failing, but only Macbeth is capable of carrying out the plan and of dealing the fatal stroke. As a more mature partner in dynamic terms Lady Macbeth regards her husband as psychologically dependent on her, not unlike a mother guiding her adolescent son: “Lady Macbeth has to guide, protect and mother her husband, whose voice sounds pitifully human and almost child-like.” Some critics interpret the relations between the Macbeths in terms of gender inversion, which is not accurate given Macbeth’s decisively manly gender, consecutive but not opposite to his wife's masculinity. In his Jungian analysis H. R. Coursen argues that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth “exchange characteristics,” and represent “opposite developments,” in that “the woman does not correspond to the feminine stereotype, and Macbeth has ‘unmanly’ scruples.” By extending the psychological distance between the characters beyond what the play can in fact support the couple is sharply polarized by the critic, for whom Lady Macbeth's “unconscious ‘maleness’ has forced Macbeth into the stereotypical role of yielding female.” Coppélia Kahn does not deny Macbeth his manliness, but at the same time she suggests that he “has not fully separated himself from the feminine source of his identity.” However, I would argue that if Macbeth depends on his wife in decision-making, it is his wife's masculinity, not her absent femininity that he depends on. The play provides enough cross-gender imagery to “unsex” Lady Macbeth and emphasize her “un-feminine character,” in which the inversion of gender is not a “fiction” but is at least as complete as in Regan and Goneril. In her famous evocation of evil spirits (1.5.38-54) Lady Macbeth suppresses all traces of femininity and motherhood (“take my milk for gall”), and acquires traits more characteristic of masculine sexual violence. She summons the Night and the smoke of Hell to hide her keen knife making the wound (51-2), while she transforms herself into a masculinized creature of “direst cruelty.”

Untouched by any scruples herself, Lady Macbeth correctly diagnoses her husband's nature as “too full o'th milk of human kindness” (1.5.16-7), thus ascribing to him a feminine quality of gentleness deriving from the woman's nurturing function. This does not make Macbeth automatically a woman in psychological terms, as some critics suggest, and his “milky” kindness is indeed confirmed nowhere in the play. Lady Macbeth's assessment of her husband's character does indicate, however, that on the gender scale his manliness is more feminine than her masculinity, and now Lady Macbeth deliberately exaggerates her husband's weakness to steel his heart to action. The kindness she talks about refers to Macbeth's static scruples, his reluctance to “catch the nearest way” and to “play false.” At the same time she is aware of her
husband's endostatic ambition to achieve what he is afraid to achieve. Her analysis of Macbeth's character touches the essence of his dilemma:

Thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win; thou'dst have, great Glamis,
That which cries, 'Thou must do,' if thou have it;
And that which rather thou dost fear to do,
Than wishest should be undone

(1.5.18-25)

What she must do now is use all her psychological domination and power of persuasion ("that I may pour my spirits in thine ear") to sway her husband towards action, by relieving him of the burden of taking an independent decision, which as an endostatic he is unable to do on his own. Macbeth unconsciously senses this psychological deficiency in himself, and this rather than the need to speed up preparations for the reception of Duncan is the real reason for sending the letter to his wife ahead of his arrival.

Lady Macbeth's onslaught on Macbeth is immediate. She greets him excitedly with the witches' prophesy and, full of elation, talks about the future as if it was already present ("I feel now / The future in the instant," 1.5.57-8), unshaken in her conviction that Duncan will never leave their castle alive: "O! never / Shall sun that morrow see! (60-1). She instructs the novice in the political game in Machiavellian tactics: "To beguile the time, / Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye, / Your hand, your tongue: look like th'innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't" (63-6). As an endodynamic she has no problems in hiding her real motives and taking full advantage of her "innocent" womanly appearance, but Macbeth is still too much of a static to be able to hide his true intentions: his face is "as a book, where men / May read strange matters" (62-3). As Bernard McElroy put it: "Macbeth is constitutionally incapable of tolerating false appearances, especially evil masquerading as good,"26 which explains his continual sense of self-loathing after committing the crime. Aware of her husband's static scruples, which she regards as an unnecessary hindrance in her plan, Lady Macbeth, her mind totally engrossed by the idea of "sovereign sway and masterdom," takes full charge of the situation, reducing her husband to the position of an executor (and executioner) of her design: "Leave all the rest to me" (73).

The presence and vulnerability of Duncan lodging in Macbeth's castle provide the now-or-never opportunity, which the endodynamic Lady Macbeth cannot fail to seize, and which the endostatic Macbeth finds difficult to let slip, not so much as a means to achieve the aim as a challenge to prove his worth in action. The understatements and fearful equivocations of Macbeth's earlier soliloquies give way to the bluntness and directness of his monologue, as he uneuphemistically calls the deed by its proper name ("assassination," "blow," "bear the knife myself," "the horrid deed"), and carefully weighs scruples against ambition for the last time. As an endostatic he is tantalized not so much by the ultimate material prize, but by the very possibility of doing that which is most expressly forbidden by all sacred and human laws. The absolute outrageousness and sacrilege of the deed committed in open violation of the most sacred feudal and familial bonds and of traditional hospitality, excite his boldness, his "vaulting ambition," as the only motive for his action. Because his ambition is as ineradicable as his endostatic character from which it derives, Macbeth de facto cannot choose but act, not so much to become king as to become the man who dared to kill the king. The tragedy of Macbeth relies not only on his ultimate disappointment with what he has gained, on his isolation and his disgraceful death, but on the trap that the givens of the circumstances and of his character have arranged for him. He cannot abstain from action because he will loath himself for not daring to kill the king, and when he kills the king he loathes himself for having done it, no third option being available. The static and the endodynamic are battling in Macbeth's transitional character, and the crime marks a decisive shift of
Macbeth’s mind towards endodynamism. The critic Jan Kott phrased Macbeth's problem in terms of assertion of identity: “Macbeth has killed not only to become king, but to assert himself. He has chosen between Macbeth, who is afraid to kill, and Macbeth, who has killed. But Macbeth, who has killed, is a new Macbeth.”27 The problem of identity Kott talks about has clearly to do with dynamism of character. Suspended between two definite dynamic categories and unable to embrace either, Macbeth remains in a limbo of indecision, unable to define himself except by negation: in Kott's words, “to himself he is not the one who is, but rather the one who is not.”28

Still dependent on his wife to take responsibility for the decision, Macbeth provokes her persuasiveness by pretending to be more static than he is, as he did earlier by sending her a letter and giving her food for thought in advance of his arrival. With Duncan already under his “protection,” Macbeth admits greater resolve and ambition before himself than he does before his wife—precisely to provoke her strong, determined reaction to spur him to action. Almost contradicting his own ambitious thoughts, he tries to dissuade his wife from proceeding any further in “this business,” and mentions “honor” and “golden opinions from all sorts of people,” as if good reputation still mattered for him. This static pose is unconsciously calculated to provoke Lady Macbeth's vehement dismissal of Macbeth's remaining scruples as unmanly cowardice and a failure to act according to one's ambition: “Art thou afraid / To be the same in thine own act and valor, / As thou art in desire?” (1.7.39-41). As a woman more manly in character than her husband, she raises the standard of manliness above static concern for honor and reputation, and grades it on the endodynamic scale of ambition, competitiveness, and the ability to suppress “unmanly” scruples:

MAC.

I dare do all that may become a man;

Who dares do more, is none.

LADY M.

That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And, to be more than what you were, you would

Be so much more the man.

(1.7.46-51)

Her ultimate argument is to taunt her husband with effeminacy and embarrass his manliness by presenting herself, a woman, as more of a man than he is, which, considering the dynamisms of their characters, is in fact true. She “unsexes” herself psychologically through a powerful and cruel image of the mother killing her own infant (54-9), thereby showing that if a woman, traditionally a weaker and gentler sex, can banish all tenderness and act “unnaturally” by destroying the fruit of her own body, then a man should have no compunction in acting according to his violent nature. To spur her husband towards action Lady Macbeth cleverly plays on gender stereotypes. The image of an innocent and vulnerable infant sucking its mother's breast is calculated to contrast in Macbeth's mind Lady Macbeth's female sex with her present unblinking manly resolution, and to embarrass her husband by showing that a woman can be even more manly than a man, if she puts her mind to it. If Macbeth does not fully appreciate his wife's true gender, other characters can be forgiven for making a stereotypical mistake of identifying a womanly appearance with a womanly
gender. The trusting Duncan unsuspectingly lays his life in the hands of a “fair and noble hostess” (1.6.24), and later the static Macduff naively assumes that the news of Duncan's murder will “kill” the “gentle lady” (2.3.82-3). Lady Macbeth can even pretend a fainting fit to uphold the men’s perception of her “weak” sex (2.3.117, 123). As is evident in the play, a woman by sex Lady Macbeth is in fact masculine in her gender, and remorse after Duncan's murder is as alien to her character as tender motherhood. Any vestige of familial sympathy in her occurs not in the context of motherhood, whose very idea is hateful to her, not even in relation to her husband, whom she patronizes and treats with contempt, but in relation to her father, for whom she reserves the final commitment of love.\(^{29}\) The cruel, masculine image of a mother plucking her nipple from the infant's boneless gum and dashing its brains out is thus calculated to make the right impression on the manly Macbeth, who will not be outdone in violence by a woman. The contrast between his wife's womanly appearance and her firm resolve does not fail to impress Macbeth, who acknowledges the manliness of her spirit and sees her “as a kind of man,”\(^{30}\) a woman of “undaunted mettle” who should “bring forth men-children only” (1.7.73-5). Her unshaken resolution, determination, certitude, cold planning, calculation, and optimism in the success of the enterprise finally tip the scales of Macbeth's dilemma decisively in favor of action and away from static scruples; he is now “settled” and ready to “bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat” (80-1).

With Duncan now practically at his mercy and with his mind now finally made up, the execution of “the terrible feat” is a matter of determinism beyond Macbeth's control. The vision of the dagger leading the murderer to Duncan's chamber betokens a mind no longer undecided, confused, or guilt-stricken, but clear of purpose and action-oriented. The visionary dagger embodying the murderous thoughts, “a dagger of the mind,” leads to the real dagger at Macbeth's side, now drawn for the murderous act, anticipated by drops of blood on the visionary dagger. “The bloody business” thus inexorably accomplishes itself in thought a moment before it is done in real action, as it now must be, all physical and psychological obstacles being removed: “I go, and it is done” (2.1.62). When the deed is done, its irrevocability confirms the tragic trap in which Macbeth has found himself after the revelation of the witches' prophesy. Just as the endostatic in him could not accept his failure to act, so his residual statism cannot now accept the crime and the violation of the most sacred laws that it represents. Since Macbeth was not interested in the profit of the crime to begin with; but rather in the challenge posed by the execution of an outrageous deed, the power gained as a result of the crime cannot outweigh the pressure of guilt caused by the crime. In other words, gone forever is the peace of mind, as indeed is perfectly clear to Macbeth, who has murdered his “innocent Sleep” together with the king. The earlier threefold progression of Macbeth's “good” fortune predicted by the witches, and echoed optimistically by Lady Macbeth, now reveals its true face to the guilt-ridden murderer: “Glamis hath murther'd Sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more!” (2.2.41-2), with “king” now appropriately replaced by “Macbeth.”

Where Macbeth is racked, for a time at least, by the sense of guilt, loses his nerve and almost botches up the murderous plan by bringing the blood-stained daggers with him from the scene of the crime, Lady Macbeth, entirely unmoved by the moral implications of the deed, displays perfect composure and self-control, upbraiding her husband for his infirmity of purpose and his “brainsickly” thoughts. While for the remorseful Macbeth “all great Neptune's ocean” will not wash the blood from his hand, for the remorseless Lady Macbeth the removal of blood from her hands has no moral or symbolic connotations, but is merely a practical problem, to remove the trace of implicating evidence: “A little water clears us of this deed” (66). For Macbeth no sooner is the deed committed than he wishes it undone, as he discovers, after it is too late, that it would have been easier to come to terms with the former Macbeth who was afraid to do a daring deed, than to accept the present Macbeth, the man who has dared to do it: “To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself” (72). The result is a terrible psychological self-injury that leaves Macbeth “a mutilated human being,” a “shattered personality,” a victim as much as a villain who, according to E. A. J. Honigmann, deserves our sympathy as well as condemnation.\(^{31}\) Until the end Macbeth will feel painfully the loss of normal life, with the accompanying “honour, love, obedience, troops of friends” (5.3.25). But he has moved too far now from the static moral mean to even contemplate the need for reparation or penance, the privilege afforded the static
Cawdor who atoned for his treachery by accepting his death with dignity. Macbeth's existential and moral limbo will only lead to philosophic nihilism, already signaled in his seemingly hypocritical public lament after Duncan's death, but which expresses, intentionally or unintentionally, his profoundest feelings:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had liv'd a blessed time; for, from this instant,
There's nothing serious in mortality;
All is but toys: renown, and grace, is dead;
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of.

(2.3.89-94)

The sudden escape of Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, after their father's death is readily and unambiguously interpreted by the credulous and straightforward statics Macduff and Rosse as a proof of their involvement in the murder. The first to suspect foul play in Macbeth is Banquo, the only character apart from Macbeth and his wife privy to the witches' prophesy. The behavior of Banquo has puzzled critics, who at times have implicated him in the evil that the witches and the Macbeths have unleashed. Bradley found Banquo as a character “not very interesting,” a man who instead of playing the part of an honest man “has yielded to evil” by acquiescing in Macbeth's accession. G. Wilson Knight went further in his condemnation, speaking of “the evil in Banquo” and of “a bond of evil between him and Macbeth,” rather inexplicably ascribing “blood-lust” and “unprecedented ferocity” to the character (cf. 1.2.40). Nicholas Grene takes a more sensible approach by regarding Banquo as “a norm of approved orthodoxy,” which he represents in his calm, authoritative speech after Duncan's murder (2.3.124-30), and as a man whose “part is to wait upon events in a wise passiveness.” Basically, the opinions vary between regarding Banquo as another endostatic (Bradley, Knight), or as a static (Grene). The play seems to support the reading of Banquo as a static character, seen in his lack of “impulse towards transgression which drives on Macbeth,” and in his patience to watch and understand “without trying to resist what is felt to be an irresistible current of events.” Banquo is indeed Macbeth's accomplice in the chronicles (Holinshed), but he is exonerated by Shakespeare who tactfully did not want to show the legendary ancestor of King James I as a party to regicide. Besides, for purely dramatic reasons it was desirable to contrast Macbeth and Banquo, and give Macbeth and his wife no accomplices. It also makes greater dramatic sense to introduce another innocent static character suffering at the hands of the endodynamic villain, than to turn Macbeth's former soldier-friend into an active rival in the competition to “help” realize their fortunes as foretold by the witches.

Banquo's initial role is to provide a positive, heroic foil for his companion and to illustrate the sort of honor and good name that Macbeth has forfeited by moving away from the mean of static honesty. Their performance in the battle with the Norwegians is still equally impressive and courageous. They are both compared to eagles and lions for their ferocity (1.2.35), and are equally acknowledged for their valor by Duncan: “Noble Banquo, / That hast no less deserv'd, nor must be known / No less to have done so,” (1.4.29-31). Banquo and Macbeth are of course treated differently by the witches, but their predicted fortunes are equivalent in the long term, even to Banquo's advantage, as is borne out by the witches' equivocal, paradoxical but balanced pronouncements:

Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.
Not so happy, yet much happier.
Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none:
So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!
Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!

(1.3.65-9)
Where Macbeth and Banquo differ is in their individual reactions to the prophesies, and these reflect their endostatic and static characters respectively. Macbeth “starts” and seems to “fear” at the fortune that leaves him “rapt withal,” while Banquo is calmly skeptical, treats the witches as a hallucination (“have we eaten on the insane root,” 84), and is the first to include them among the Devil's party (107). The partial confirmation of the prophesy is for the eager and ambitious Macbeth a proof of its veracity, but for the prudent and cautious Banquo it is a warning of the Devil's trap: “oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of Darkness tell us truths; / Win us with honest trifles, to betray's / In deepest consequence” (123-26). After the entire prophesy concerning Macbeth has been fulfilled, Banquo no longer talks about the Devil and accepts the oracle as genuine truth, but stoically resigns himself to fate, refraining from any action with regard to his part of the prophesy (“But, hush; no more,” 3.1.10). Sententious and straightforward, Banquo believes in Providence and natural order, but he is also dull as a character in a play, and his pint-size rightness and decency are completely overshadowed by Macbeth's agonizing inner struggle and mammoth crime. To Macbeth's ambiguous proposal to Banquo to “cleave to [his] consent” and support Macbeth's claim to the crown in the event of Duncan's natural death, Banquo reasserts his loyalty (“allegiance clear”) to the present king, and intends to remain free from guilt (“keep / My bosom franchis'd,” 2.1.25-8). Banquo thus makes clear his commitment to honorable means in advancing his fortune, thereby disassociating himself forever from his former companion.

An ambiguous moment comes when Banquo begins to suspect Macbeth's foul play and neither does nor says anything to expose him, a circumstance that proved for Bradley that Banquo was accessory to the murder and now keeps silent out of ambition. But Banquo's private and unproven suspicion (“I fear, / Thou play'dst most fouly for't,” 3.1.2-3), offers no grounds for open accusation, made even less likely now that Macbeth enjoys royal immunity and is, in the absence of Duncan's sons, a legitimate ruler. Kenneth Muir argues that Banquo “ought to have behaved loyally to Macbeth until Malcolm had set foot on Scottish soil,” because James I's theory of government condemned rebellion even against manifest tyrants. But professing loyalty to the ruler suspected of sacrilegious crime would not have been consistent with Banquo's static, honest character, and would have required an opportunistic, time-serving endostatic disposition which Banquo simply did not possess. Having his doubts and being unable to openly accuse or oppose Macbeth, all that Banquo as an honest person can do is to remove himself from the royal presence without appearing ostentatious or discourteous. This is precisely what he does by politely excusing himself from the banquet, and riding away with Fleance in an unspecified direction.

But Banquo is trapped, firstly because of his knowledge of the Weird Sisters' prophesy, which makes him a menace to Macbeth, and secondly because of the promise that his descendants would inherit the throne, which makes him a political rival that Macbeth would not tolerate. These are the main practical reasons (for the now endodynamic Macbeth at any rate) why Banquo must be eliminated, rather than Macbeth's private resentment about Banquo's noble character, “his royalty of nature,” “dauntless temper of his mind,” his “wisdom,” and “valor” (3.1.49, 51-3), as Kenneth Muir rather naively suggests. Macbeth probably wouldn't care less about Banquo's character at this moment, and his sole concern is his personal safety and the future of his reign. Banquo's praises appear rather to exonerate once and for all King James I's reputed ancestor from all blame, and in the more immediate dramatic context they serve to contrast the victim's noble character with the murderer's cold-blooded callousness, as Macbeth calls Banquo his chief guest at the banquet after already arranging for his assassination.

Banquo's murder marks another step in Macbeth's development away from the early statism towards the endodynamic extreme of the dynamic spectrum. First as a static Glamis Macbeth was able to win his noble reputation by courageously risking his own life in a face-to-face battle. Later as an endostatic traitor Cawdor he still took a risk by murdering Duncan with his own hands. Now as an endodynamic king he no longer risks his own safety but hires assassins and gives orders to have his victims killed. With every crime Macbeth is more and more psychologically removed from his victims, has less and less scruples, and his motivation becomes less personal and more political. In Duncan he kills, not without remorse, his lord, his kinsman, and
his guest. By hiring assassins to murder Banquo he kills a friend whom he envies and fears. And when he decides to destroy the house of Macduff he is motivated less by revenge but more by a desire to forestall the menace of future loss of power,\textsuperscript{40} and in doing so he causes the deaths of people he has probably never even seen.

The dynamic progression of Macbeth's character also affects the relationship with his wife. The characterization of Lady Macbeth does not evolve in the same way as Macbeth's, and while she is an endodynamic to begin with, he is becoming one in the course of the play. If the identification of Macbeth as king with endodynamism is correct, then by Act III he has psychologically “caught up” with his wife by attaining the same extreme masculine gender. This means that at this stage he is no longer dependent on his wife in decision-making, and in fact does not need her psychologically or emotionally or otherwise, which is indeed reflected from Act III onwards. The identical gender accounts for relations based on mutual understanding and solidarity in the pursuit of common goals, but it removes the element of psychological difference and dependence between the two characters, which gives so much dramatic tension in the first two acts of the play. Since the later acts focus primarily on Macbeth, his wife moves more and more to the background, at first reduced to being Macbeth's spouse and companion but no longer his support, and later disappearing from the plot altogether. The last opportunity for Lady Macbeth to exercise her earlier domination occurs when Macbeth loses his nerve at the sight of Banquo's Ghost, giving his wife an occasion to question his manliness (“Are you a man?” 3.4.57). But just as earlier on she was correct in ascribing Macbeth's scruples to his static nature, she is wrong now in attributing his fit to womanly fearfulness (62-5): now a hardened endodynamic, he is not afraid of ghosts (58-9) but of losing power. It is characteristic that while Lady Macbeth's domination and determination were crucial in convincing Macbeth to commit the first crime, he does not even consult her, let alone seek her decision or approval, in arranging for the next murders. The decision to assassinate Banquo is clearly Macbeth's own initiative, as is fully explained in the soliloquy (3.1.47-71), and confirmed in Lady Macbeth's uncharacteristically helpless “What's to be done?” (3.2.44), answered with her husband's confident and almost patronizing “Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, / Till thou applaud the deed” (45-6). It is now Macbeth who does all the reasoning and who independently takes all the murderous decisions, and the main thing that connects him now with his wife is the mutually shared and almost paranoid sense of fear and insecurity, so typical for endodynamics holding power. They eat their meals in fear, and their sleep is afflicted with terrible dreams (3.2.17-9). The most powerful man in the kingdom regards his power as nothing, unless it gives him safety and freedom from fear which he evidently lacks: “To be thus [i.e. the king] is nothing, but to be safely thus” (3.1.47). The sentiment is echoed by Lady Macbeth for whom likewise power is empty unless it gives security:

\begin{quote}
Where our desire is got without content:
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy,
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy
\end{quote}

(3.2.4-7)

In his constant fear Macbeth is obsessively preoccupied with real and imagined dangers, and all his actions are designed as preemptive strikes to forestall possible threats: “We have scourch'd the snake, not kill'd it: / She'll close, and be herself; whilst our poor malice / Remains in danger of her former tooth” (3.2.13-5). Also gone are the last remnants of static scruples and a sense of guilt, and if Duncan's name is recalled it is because Macbeth envies the murdered king his peace, not because he regrets murdering him:

\begin{quote}
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;
Treason has done his worst: nor steel, nor poison,
\end{quote}

(3.2.13-5)
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing
Can touch him further!

(3.2.19-26)

The voice of static conscience, still strong in Act I, now vanishes without a trace, giving way entirely to endodynamic cruelty and unscrupulousness (“full of scorpions is my mind,” 36), which grow bigger and bigger: “Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill” (55). Even the Ghost of Banquo is not a projection of Macbeth's guilt, as is sometimes supposed, but of his paranoid fear and insecurity. During the banquet the Ghost sits in Macbeth's seat, replacing him as king, as was prophesied, a visible proof of the futility of Macbeth's efforts to dispose of his political rival, who now returns to push the usurper from his stool (3.4.81). While there was still a concrete, “rational” reason to assassinate Banquo, there is none in Macbeth's plan to pursue Macduff except the pretext of the latter's avoidance of Macbeth. State terror, as in Stalinist Russia, now gets out of control, becoming all-pervading, random, indiscriminate, and inescapable, motivated solely by the tyrant's insecurity and paranoid fear rather than by any pragmatic reasons. Macbeth has entered an insane, irrational phase of extreme endodynamism, in which he has severed all positive social ties and has completely alienated himself from all humanity, trapped in the ever-intensifying compulsion to commit more and more violence:

Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,
Which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd

(3.4.135-39)

Even the visions induced by the witches confirm Macbeth's present sole obsession with security, power, and violence. The apparition of an armed head confirms his fear of Macduff, while the apparition of a bloody child strengthens his determination to “be bloody, bold, and resolute” (4.1.79), and verbalizes his wish to be invulnerable (“none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth”). The apparition of a crowned child again tells him to “be lion-mettled” and “proud,” and reiterates his irrational desire to remain untouchable (“until / Great Birnam wood …”), while the final show of eight kings confirms his fear concerning Banquo's predicted fortune. In this sense Macbeth learns hardly anything new during his second visit to the Weird Sisters. Understandably, neither his character nor his actions change in any way: he was “yet but young in deed” (3.4.143) before consulting the witches, and now too “the very firstlings of [his] heart shall be / The firstlings of [his] hand” (4.1.147-8).

With the shift of Macbeth's character decisively towards endodynamism, his wife's dramatic role ends effectively in the scene with Banquo's Ghost (3.4), in which she has the last chance to rebuke her husband for his alleged lack of manliness. Unlike in King Lear, whose masculine women play an active dramatic role by fighting remorselessly with Cordelia's army and treacherously between themselves to the very end, from Act III onwards Lady Macbeth has really nothing more to do in the play in terms of plot development. In his portrayal of these “nightmarish” women Shakespeare appears to have taken poetic license by making their characters look more masculine and endodynamic than is probably psychologically possible. As shown in the graph of gender types …, the extreme masculine gender is reserved for men, while individual women can only attain manly, endostatic character. This probably explains why the behavior of Regan, Goneril, and Lady Macbeth is frequently described in the plays as “unnatural”: their cruelty, thirst for power, and complete lack of remorse and conscience can realistically be found in individual men but not in women. There seems to be no doubt that the Lady Macbeth of the first two acts is an endodynamic character, psychologically more masculine than her endostatic, manly husband. This rules out the possibility of her being ever moved by the voice of conscience, still felt by Macbeth before the murder of Duncan and later suppressed upon his
attainment of the endodynamic character. In the light of these characterological configurations Lady Macbeth's famous sleep-walking scene presents something of a problem, because instead of hardened mercilessness, or insanity and paranoia, realistically expected in extreme endodynamics, we have the disintegration of personality caused by what looks like a long-stifled voice of conscience and pity.

With the sleep-walking scene in mind it was possible for Coleridge to read back into the early scenes of the play Lady Macbeth's repressed conscience: “she endeavors to stifle its voice, and keep down its struggles, by inflated and soaring fancies, and appeals to spiritual agency.” The apparent lack of consistency in the characterization of Lady Macbeth across the play has indeed baffled critics. G. Wilson Knight for example called her on the one hand a woman “possessed of evil passion,” “inhuman,” an embodiment of “evil absolute and extreme,” and on the other hand “a pure woman, with a woman's frailty.” It is as if the critics had difficulty accepting a literary female character of utter depravity, and were trying if not to exonerate her then at least to qualify her wickedness. There is a tradition of blaming not Lady Macbeth's conscious will but her demoniacal possession for the evil she commits, and even of sentimentalizing her as the loving wife with an affectionate and gentle disposition, a maternal figure, a sensual woman, and a neurotic. Without the sleep-walking scene Lady Macbeth's character would be as consistent (or even more so) than her husband's, but as it is the critics are faced with a paradoxical situation, whereby a visibly depraved, endodynamic character has to be denied its depravity. In the words of Kenneth Muir, “although it is true that Lady Macbeth is not naturally depraved or conscienceless … she deliberately chooses evil.”

Despite its apparent characterological inconsistency, the sleep-walking scene on its own remains dramatically powerful and poignant. Lady Macbeth's somnambulism offers a version of complete alienation from life and human relations to which her complicity in Macbeth's crimes has led her. The Doctor describes her state as “a great perturbation in nature,” the oxymoronic “slumbery agitation,” a sort of living death in which she receives “at once the benefit of sleep, and … the effects of watching” (5.1.9-11). The paradox of being awake, active, able to speak, and at the same time unconscious and absent-minded provides a moving tableau of isolation and alienation. But it is difficult to interpret most of what Lady Macbeth says or does in her sleep-walking as an expression of her guilty conscience, and Bradley was probably right in saying that “in Lady Macbeth's misery there is no trace of contrition.” The letter she writes has been variously interpreted as a confession, a warning for Lady Macduff, or a message to Macbeth indicating that she still wishes to control him, but it could indeed be anything. For example, Lady Macbeth may be writing a reply to her husband's early letter informing her about the witches's prophesy (1.5.1-14), in which case she may be either dissuading him from taking any steps (the static variant) or, to the contrary, telling him to go ahead, the way she did (the endynamic variant). The famous gesture of washing the hands, linked with Lady Macbeth's direct implication in Duncan's murder (2.2.66), can again be interpreted as a sign of belated remorse but also as a desire to escape detection: “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” (5.1.33). The line such as “What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to accompt?” repeats the same cynical confidence in their invulnerability with which Lady Macbeth answered her husband's earlier fear of being found out (1.7.75-80). The only moment that can be interpreted as betraying Lady Macbeth's pity and regret is a “feminine” reference to the perfumes of Arabia unable to “sweeten this little hand” (48). It is linked back to Macbeth's regretful realization that “all great Neptune's ocean” will not wash the blood from his hand (2.2.59-60), and in Lady Macbeth's case the reference is indeed interpreted by the Doctor as an indication of a heart “sorely charg'd.” The poignancy of this scene lies therefore not so much in the alleged feelings of pity in the guilt-stricken Lady Macbeth, as in the reenactment of her past crimes and her present helplessness and isolation as indications of the ultimate pointlessness and futility of these crimes. In her loss of power and self-control, in her alienation even from her husband, and in her desperate suicidal death announced by “the cry of women” (5.5.8), Lady Macbeth appears to be womanized at the end of the play. This can be interpreted as another characterological inconsistency, which perhaps restores gender balance and psychological realism, disturbed earlier in the play by the poetic license of presenting a female character with a mind more masculine than the most manly man. According to Kenneth Muir, the seeming inconsistency in the characterization of Lady Macbeth “may reflect an ambiguity in Shakespeare's mind, which he cultivated for dramatic reasons,”
but “the audience could take it either way.”

The apparent indifference with which Macbeth greets the news of his wife's death (“She should have died hereafter,” 5.5.17) signals the next step in his own alienation from life, and in particular from Eros as the feminine principle of relatedness. With Lady Macbeth's death the last positive link with a fellow human being has been severed, the fact that occasions Macbeth's famous nihilistic reflection on the meaninglessness of existence (5.5.19-28). If masculinity as the opposite of femininity is to be pushed to an absolute extreme, then even a remotest relation with the feminine principle would have to be denied, including a man's dependence on his mother who brought him into this world. This denial becomes manifest in Macbeth's unconscious desire to place himself outside the natural scheme of things, and to achieve a quasi-divine immortality and invulnerability—the ultimate dream of an endodynamic individual who cannot tolerate any loss of power, here, the physiological power that sustains his life. It has always been some small consolation to the victims of tyranny that the tyrants, for all their formidable sociological power, could not compensate for the loss of their own physiological power indefinitely, and eventually had to die, like their victims. This explains the despots' irrational obsession with longevity and with all sorts of elixirs of immortality, with which they wanted to escape natural laws. Hence also Macbeth's illusion that he can practically live for ever, embodied in the vision of a bloody child reassuring Macbeth that no man born of a woman can harm him (4.1.80-1). The critic Madelon Gohlke reads Macbeth's nihilism, his childlessness, indifference to his wife's death, and rejection of all feminine values of trust and hospitality as a systematic attempt by the masculine hero to deny an awareness of dependence on women in general, including the mother with her procreative role. Similarly, Janet Adelman interprets Macbeth's desire to be invulnerable as a masculine “fantasy of escape from the maternal matrix,” and as an attempt to be exempt from the universal human condition of being “born of woman.” But even in this last illusion Macbeth is disappointed, as his dream of immortality is shattered by a last-minute revelation that Macduff, his principal personal foe, “was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd” (5.8.15-6), a circumstance that for some reason predestines Macduff to be, metaphorically, the medicine to purge the country's “sickly weal” (5.2.27-9).

In folklore, the child born through what later became called the Caesarian section was said to possess great strength, the power to find hidden treasure and to see spirits. In any case, the unusual circumstances of birth denoted an unusual character, a person singled out from others to perform some exceptional deed. In Shakespeare's play the special status of Macduff counterbalances and in fact cancels Macbeth's illusion of his special status as a man immune to injury and death, but there are more elements that place these two figures at opposite dramatic poles and set them on a collision course. The two names even sound similar, and although this fact is purely coincidental in the chronicles, it does acquire a special dramatic significance in Shakespeare's play, in which it links and contrasts the two characters. The static Macduff makes his first dramatic entry even before he appears in person in Macbeth's castle on the night of Duncan's murder, by famously knocking at the gates as many as ten times, while the Macbeths are washing their hands from Duncan's blood (2.2.56, 64, 68, 72; 2.3.1, 3, 7, 12, 15, 20). With his static insistence on punctuality Macduff was determined to be on time to wake the king, as he had been commanded to do, and one cannot help thinking that he narrowly missed preventing Duncan's murder, had he knocked at the gate a moment sooner: “he did command me to call timely on him: / I have almost slipp'd the hour” (2.3.45-6). The ultimate avenger of Duncan, he is the first to discover the murder and raise the clamor after entering the King's chamber, the first to do so after Macbeth, again because he was so commanded: “"I'll make so bold to call, / For 'tis my limited service” (50-1). It is also the role of “the good Macduff” to voice public outcry at the sacrilegious murder of “the Lord's anointed Temple” (2.3.67). A straightforward static, Macduff accepts without suspicion the official version that the King's sons committed the murder. Interestingly, however, unlike all the other Scottish nobles, including the already suspicious Banquo, Macduff does not attend Macbeth's coronation (2.4.36)—a dramatic device designed to remove him from the plot for some time, and especially from Macbeth's presence. Macduff's snubbing absence and his escape to England (3.4.127-8; 3.6.21-3, 29-31, 40; 4.2.142), combined with the witches' warning against the Thane of Fife (4.1.71-2), indeed provide the tyrant with an excuse to invade his castle and massacre his family, in an act of political revenge as much as of
personal spite against Macduff's happy family life. Childless himself, Macbeth resentfully puts “to th'edge o'th'sword / [Macduff's] wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line” (4.1.151-3).

Macduff's absence is dramatically necessary, but it still has to be justified psychologically. To leave his family at the mercy of a vindictive tyrant looks unwise to say the least, but the decision was motivated by a noble desire to organize political support in England and Northumbria to free Scotland from Macbeth's oppression. It would appear therefore that Macduff's actions result from a choice between familial obligations and patriotic duties, a typical situation for a static, and once Macduff has chosen to serve the political cause all qualms about abandoning his family became suppressed. On the other hand the spirited, outspoken, and static Lady Macduff does not understand the political reasons of her husband's departure, and interprets it as a betrayal of his familial duties and as his lack of love (“He loves us not,” 4.2.8). G. Wilson Knight goes even further in his disapproval of Macduff, and makes his a person “involved in evil,” as seen in his “cruel desertion of his family.”

Rosse, all too familiar with the grim realities of Macbeth's regime (“cruel are the times”), and with his own delay in deserting the tyrannous king, is nearer the mark when he praises Macduff for being “noble, wise, judicious,” one who “best knows / The fits o'th'season” (4.2.16-7). Unlike other time-servers like Rosse or Lenox, Macduff had the courage, if not the wisdom, to be the first to leave Scotland and organize opposition around Malcolm, before he was joined by other lords.

The long conversation between Malcolm and Macduff (4.3) stands out from the rest of the play for being perhaps too long, almost tedious, but in E. A J. Honigmann's view its deliberately slow tempo has a dramatic quality of arresting the play's onward-rushing momentum just before Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking, where time stands still. As a “choric commentary” the scene draws closer attention to the figures whose political importance, one as the avenger of Duncan and the other as Duncan's legitimate successor, has not yet been acknowledged by due dramatic prominence, given almost entirely to the tyrannous Macbeth. It is interesting to note that Malcolm, Macbeth's main political opponent, is also the latter's opposite in a dramatic and psychological sense; that is, in terms of gender type and dynamism of character Malcolm appears to be an exostatic, womanly man. During the initial battle with the Norwegians, in which Macbeth displayed such feats of heroic valor and efficiency, Duncan's eldest son was taken prisoner and had to be rescued (1.2.4-5), a circumstance suggesting lack of manhood and valor expected from an heir to the throne in a heroic society. Still it is the inept Malcolm who is officially announced as Duncan's successor, the fact naturally resented by the manly Macbeth, whose political ambitions have been whetted by his military victory (1.4.48-50). During the night of Duncan's murder the two royal sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, staying in the room next to their father's, are awaken from their sleep by a nightmarish dream of murder. However, instead of resolutely getting up and checking if everything is all right, they give in to unmanly fear, say their prayers, comfort each other, and fall back to sleep. When the murder is discovered, the royal sons are the last to arrive at the scene, they have practically nothing to say, nor are they consulted on anything, and their immediate reaction is to flee: “where we are, / There's daggers in men's smiles: the near in blood, / The nearer bloody” (2.3.137-9). Their cowardly escape puts the blame for the murder on them and removes the last obstacle in Macbeth's ascent to the throne. In this way, by shirking his responsibility as the appointed royal successor, the unmanly Malcolm has in fact contributed to the national calamity that was Macbeth's reign.

In the context of his early immaturity the long conversation with Macduff illustrates Malcolm's coming of age, as he gradually prepares himself for the assumption of his duties as the future King of Scotland. He has now enough statism of character to appreciate the seriousness of his task, but he is still too much of an exostatic to cope with the task effectively on his own. Malcolm is determined to save his country from tyranny, but he can only do so by enlisting a foreign power to his aid and by using Macduff as a personal avenger. Malcolm is now mature enough to initially mistrust Macduff's good intentions and to test his loyalty, but he arranges his test in the form of a spectacle, a bit like Hamlet, another exostatic figure, by pretending to be worse than he actually is. He openly talks of his “vices” that would make “black Macbeth … seem as pure as snow” (4.3.52-3), describing at great length his lust, avarice, and falsehood. His simulation of tyranny, however, is so theatrical that only someone as straightforward, not to say dull, as Macduff could take it
literally. (A person possessing these vices would have an endodynamic character, in which case he or she
would not be talking so frankly about them.) In this almost comic scene Malcolm's exostatic play-acting
succeeds as a test of Macduff's integrity, whereupon the virgin boy-king hails the manly Macduff as the true
champion of Scotland, leaving the latter quite confused at Malcolm's contradictory confession: “Such
welcome and unwelcome things at once, / 'Tis hard to reconcile” (4.3.138-9). With the support of England and
Macduff, Malcolm is now firmly in charge, more and more confident in his role as Scotland's savior and
future king, as evidenced in his upbeat, commanding tone at the end of Act IV:

This tune goes manly.

Come, go we to the King: our power is ready;
Our lack is nothing but our leave. Macbeth
Is ripe for shaking, and the Powers above
Put on their instruments. Receive what cheer you may;
The night is long that never finds the day

(4.3.235-40)

It is also Malcolm's idea to hide the number of his army under the branches cut from the Birnam wood, a
clever endostatic trick not fully consistent with his exostatic character displayed so far. Dramatically,
however, the association of Malcolm with the Birnam wood links him, together with Macduff, with the
witches' threefold warning to Macbeth, and places him, indirectly at least, in the context of revenge for
Duncan's death.

Macbeth and Macduff as the ultimate opponents are brought together at last in what looks like a fair,
face-to-face combat, but while the static Macduff risks his life to fight his cause and avenge his family, the
endodynamic Macbeth enters the fight additionally protected, as he thinks, by the spell of invulnerability. In
his view therefore Macbeth is not risking anything, and can still inflict death on others, as he does by killing
the young Siward. As said before, the deceptive magical protection is the ultimate expression of Macbeth's
extreme masculinity, through which he wants to remain independent from the feminine principle of
relatedness, even in owing his birth to a woman. But by a master stroke of Shakespeare's dramatic irony
Macbeth turns out to be more vulnerable in his masculinity than is Macduff in his static androgyny. Bound up
with femininity as a family man and as a person capable of feeling profound grief (4.3.221-30), through the
unusual circumstances of his birth Macduff turns out to be less dependent on the feminine principle, and is
consequently more manly than the self-deluding Macbeth. Indeed, the revelation of Macduff's extraordinary
birth has an immediate emasculating effect on Macbeth: “Accursed be that tongue that tells me so, / For it
hath cow'd my better part of man” (5.8.17-8), and for the first time he feels fear (“I'll not fight with thee,” 22).
Deprived of the confidence afforded him by the magical spell, Macbeth now fights with Macduff on equal
terms, and in his death proves to be less manly in his rejection of femininity than is Macduff in his more
feminine personality and in his family feelings.

After the static champion kills the endodynamic tyrant, the exostatic young king safely takes his father's
throne without having to fight for it. Even the young Siward, without any personal grudge against Macbeth,
showed greater valor by dying a heroic death in direct combat, than Malcolm with the murder of his father to
avenge:

Your son [young Siward], my Lord, has paid a soldier's debt:
He only liv'd but till he was a man;
The which no sooner had his prowess confirm'd,
In the unshrinking station where he fought,
But like a man he died

(5.9.5-9)
The arrival of Macduff carrying Macbeth's head to hail Malcolm as the King of Scotland provides a telling tableau of the latter's ineffectuality and dependence on his executive branch, so to speak, and emphasizes the nominality of Malcolm's office. Having cowardly fled the country after Duncan's murder, he has returned on the shoulders of stronger and more efficient allies to take the office, and the last words of the play belong, ironically, to him. Now secure on the throne due to no credit of his own, Malcolm promptly adopts the royal plural, graciously promotes the thanes to earls, condemns “this dead butcher, and his fiend-like Queen” (35), officially invites the émigrés to return home, and promises, “by the grace of Grace,” a just reign, in which everything will be performed “in measure, time, and place” (39). If Malcolm is his father's son, his present exostatism will evolve eventually into statism, with all the accompanying virtues of “Justice, Verity, Temp'rance, Stableness, / Bounty, Perseverence, Mercy, Lowliness, / Devotion, Patience, Courage, Fortitude” (4.3.92-4), and other “king-becoming graces” that no doubt characterized Duncan, and in this way the circle will close. In Roman Polanski's film version of Macbeth (1971), the last scene shows Donalbain, Malcolm's younger brother and successor to the throne, riding alone on a misty moor at the spot where Macbeth and Banquo had met the three witches for the first time …

Notes

4. It has been observed (note on page 5 in the Arden Macbeth) on a number of occasions that the word “bloody” is mentioned over a hundred times in the course of the play. All quotations throughout are from the Arden Edition of William Shakespeare, Macbeth, ed. Kenneth Muir (Walton-on-Thames, 1997 [1951]).
8. Stewart, Character and Motive, 90-91.
16. We are not given the whole of Macbeth's letter to his wife, but her surprise at the news about the king's arrival at Inverness delivered by a messenger after she has read the letter clearly indicates that the fact was not mentioned in the letter itself. Consequently, Macbeth had sent his letter before Duncan announced that he would stay in Macbeth's castle, for he surely would not have failed to mention this important fact to his wife. Upon his arrival home Macbeth brings the news about the king again, uncertain whether she knew about it (1.5.58).
17. Lady Macbeth repeats the prophesy again when greeting her husband (1.5.54-5).
22. Kahn, Man’s Estate, 173.
29. Lady Macbeth would have killed Duncan herself, “had he not resembled [her] father as he slept” (2.2.12-13). On the theme of Lady Macbeth's filial dependence on her father see Marjorie Garber, Coming of Age in Shakespeare (London, 1981), 47.
31. Honigmann, Shakespeare: Seven Tragedies, 128, 129 ff, 135.
38. The purposelessness of Banquo's journey is made clear by his evasive answer to Macbeth's ominous, direct question concerning the destination: “Is't far you ride?” to which Banquo replies: “As far, my Lord, as will fill up the time / 'Twixt this and supper” (3.1.23-5). Given Banquo's suspicion of Macbeth the vagueness of his answer is also motivated by fear for his safety—the feeling promptly and tragically confirmed for Banquo.
40. Grene, Shakespeare's Tragic Imagination, 212. Honigmann notices a similar progression in Macbeth's character: “We observe a steady decline as he becomes hardened to murder … He struggles desperately against the killing of Duncan; he proceeds to the murder of Banquo without the same agonizing preliminaries … whereas Macduff's death means nothing at all to him … And he decides to massacre Macduff's family after even less preliminary hesitation, as a mere act of revenge” (Shakespeare: Seven Tragedies, 136).
43. Knight, The Wheel of Fire, 152.
44. Discussed by Muir, Introduction, lviii-lx.
45. Muir, Introduction, lvi-
46. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 378.
47. Macbeth, note 6 on page 137.
48. “we need not deny her (what Shakespeare must have given her) pity,” Muir, Introduction, lx.
51. Adelman, “‘Born of Woman,’” 117.
52. To emphasize the effect of knocking, interpreted by the Porter as knocking at Hell Gate (2.3.2), the word “knock” is repeated as many as sixteen times.

53. Characteristically, when Ross announces bad news before Macduff, the latter's first thought is of the country, and only the second about his personal situation: “What concern they? / The general cause? Or is it a fee-grief, / Due to some single breast?” (4.3.195-7).

55. Honigmann, Shakespeare: Seven Tragedies, 141.
56. L. C. Knights, Hamlet and Other Shakespearean Essays (Cambridge, 1979), 297.
57. Rather curiously, of the two royal brothers “one did laugh in's sleep, and one cried, ‘Murther!’” (2.2.22), but it is not clear which did what.

Bibliography


Gregory Doran’s brilliant, though not quite faultless, production is designed for touring. The performance style is so mobile and energetic that it seems as if the players are limbering up to sprint all the way to Tokyo, where they will shortly arrive, as so many soldiers and assassins do in the course of the play, almost too breathless to deliver their urgent messages. The Folio’s already short text has been considerably shortened, and it too gallops along, concluding in little over two hours. Major cuts to the final act are particularly crucial in transforming Shakespeare’s text from historical melodrama to contemporary psychodrama. While the Folio’s Macbeth explicitly rejects suicide as the cowardly act of a “Roman fool”, Antony Sher’s bright-eyed psychotic is the agent of his own punishment, running forward to impale himself on a minuscule knife wielded by Macduff (Nigel Cooke). His number is up, and, as he is carried off like a stuck pig, he is closed in upon by thickening mist and a tree-welding army.

We are shown no “dead butcher”, but a manic obsessive who has imposed his own nightmares on the world around him, persuading us that they are our nightmares, too. Tamburlaine-like, he can even orchestrate his own death. Yet in its visual style this Macbeth seems at first bafflingly decontextualized, and it is hard to find our bearings. The excellent Witches (Diane Beck, Noma Dumerzweni, Polly Kemp) speak and move as one, but are so muffled up as to be mostly faceless, and their main distinguishing mark is that, like Eliot’s Madam Sosostris, they all have bad colds. The play’s world appears to be neither Jacobean, medieval, Scottish, nor even late twentieth-century, and the pervasive use of darkness, mist and dirty black uniforms from the RSC’s rag-bag will cause some narrative confusion to that goodly proportion of every audience which is not already familiar with the play. Shaven-headed men in black look rather similar, whether goodies or baddies, and in the scene in which Macbeth urgently commands Seyton (here “Satan”) “Give me my armour”, it is by no means obvious that the dark flak jacket he wants to put on is significantly different from various black garments he has on already.

Insistence on any colour as long as it’s black seems to extend even to the play’s act of violence. The “bloody man” of Scene Two looks more muddy than bloody, and when Banquo’s murderer arrives at the Macbeths’
dinner party to be greeted with the words, “There's blood on thy face”, I couldn't detect a trace of redness. Nor does the Macbeths' frugal dinner table offer either red wine or red meat. Yet eventually this compelling but opaque production reveals its wider frame of reference. In the “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” speech, which I have never heard better delivered, Sher opens up the line of desperately urgent communication between Macbeth and the audience which up to that point had seemed indistinct and crackly. We discover ourselves with him in the realm of peri-millennial angst. It's not just the Queen who is dead, but God—indeed, Macbeth has murdered him, along with sleep, friendship and moral value, and we are all together in the theatre of the world participating in a terrible shadow-play of nothingness.

There are three major exceptions to the muddy and “timeless” costuming. Lofty King Duncan (Joseph O'Conor) is hieratic and fatherly in gold brocade, and it was one of the production's few missed tricks that Macbeth as King did not assume the whole of his Byzantine priest-king outfit, which, given the difference in height between O'Conor and Sher, would have reinforced the recurring image of the usurper's “giant's robes / Upon a dwarfish thief”. Harriet Walter is a splendidly statuesque and dignified Lady Macbeth, arrayed in elegant long evening dresses, first black, then regal green velvet, then a fluid ivory night-shift for her sleep-walking and obsessive-compulsive hand-washing.

Everything about her performance is mesmerizing, and the nervous frailty that fuels her assured energy is hinted from the outset. She and Macbeth embrace with terrible eagerness, as if milking each other for strength and mutual reinforcement. This is an appallingly compelling folie a deux. The third differently costumed character is the Porter, alias Satan/Seyton (Stephen Noonan), who clambers up from the cellarage looking like a shabby pulchinello or downmarket children's entertainer. Not everyone may enjoy his pantomimic, ad-libbing style, but I did, and suspect that he will be a winner with the school parties. The cringe-making awfulness of his attempts to get the audience to respond to his dreadful “Knock Knock” jokes suggests that Hell is an eternity of daytime television: a good message to all those who have taken the trouble to come to live theatre.

Criticism: Production Reviews: Markland Taylor (review date 29 May 2000)


[In the following review, Taylor maintains that Terry Hands's minimalist staging of Macbeth lacked passion and energy. The critic further avers that Kelsey Grammer's portrayal of Macbeth was not the disaster that some critics called it, but merely pedestrian.]

If audiences are willing to accept a reasonably competent, underlit staged reading of Shakespeare's Macbeth in order to see Kelsey Grammer, aka TV's Frasier, play a leading Shakespearean role on Broadway for the first time, then the director, cast and producers of this production can relax. If, on the other hand, there are expectations of anything resembling a blood-red, deeply felt investigation of the play and its characters, there is much cause for concern. On the level of a staged reading, Grammer's performance of the title role is by no means a disaster, nor is it sufficient reason for mounting this production. Never for a moment does he become Shakespeare's anguished Scot, remaining instead a stolid, somewhat flat-footed middle-class, middle-aged man in a reading. Not that anyone else in the cast succeeds any better, Diane Venora being a major disappointment as Lady Macbeth.

Grammer, who has had more than a little Shakespearean experience including appearances in Broadway productions of Macbeth and Othello, has the very real virtue of projecting his lines cleanly, clearly and intelligently, but without any real urgency or passion. And neither his Macbeth nor the play as a whole ever comes alive, ever progresses from page to stage.
Experienced English Shakespearean director Terry Hands is certainly partly to blame, for though he has staged the production he certainly hasn't directed it. There's no sense of him or anyone else involved having any particular feelings one way or another about the play, and there's virtually no interaction between any of the actors.

The somewhat penny-pinched looking production itself can best be described as minimalist. The bare set, which exposes most of the rear wall of the stage, is black on black as are almost all of the costumes but for a few splashes of white. These costumes, which include long overcoats, helmets and, at one point, a black T-shirt for Macbeth, are blandly timeless as, indeed, is the production as a whole, taking place nowhere in particular at no particular time.

In order to bring the production as near to its audience as possible, a sharply angled corner of the stage floor has been projected out well beyond the proscenium into the audience, thereby doing away with 150 or so seats.

Hands has done the lighting himself, having great fun with rows of white spots slicing the gloom from both the rear of the stage and front of the house. This makes for some dramatic lighting, but it too often leaves the cast in gloom.

As for visual surprises, there are few. A flight of stairs is lowered from time to time and a high platform sometimes juts out from the wings. And when Birnam Wood advances on Dunsinane it does so by rows of green-leaved trees being dropped suddenly from the flies. This, however, does not suggest soldiers advancing by disguising themselves behind branches. At another point, the lighting paints a cross on the stage floor, but what this is meant to signify is not made clear.

Hands has kept the production moving swiftly, partly because there are so few props, so little set. And he does manage to keep his witches, three vigorous bag ladies who actively involve themselves in some of the battle scenes, from being ridiculous as they can so readily become.

But he hasn't worked anywhere near enough in helping his actors inhabit their characters. Venora urgently needs assistance, for she makes little impression. She garbles too many of her lines, and her sleepwalking scene is particularly unfortunate; barely a word can be understood, and she is proof that it's impossible to wring your hands and carry a candle at the same time.

The director also needs to do something about the underpopulated banquet-vision scene, which looks like nothing more than a four-character, plus one servant, wine party. Some of the supporting actors are a good deal better than others, but no one really distinguishes himself or herself. A limited use of sound effects (thunder, bird calls, etc.) and music is efficiently done.

This is the first of three productions of Macbeth to be seen in New England this year. It is scheduled to be followed by the RSC's highly acclaimed production starring Antony Sher and Harriet Walter (part of the Intl. Festival of Arts & Ideas in New Haven) in mid-June and then by one launching Michael Wilson's 2000-01 season at Hartford Stage.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Charles Isherwood (review date 19 June 2000)**

In the following review of Terry Hands's Macbeth, Isherwood asserts that Kelsey Grammer gave an inadequate performance of the title role in an undistinguished production.

If you're going on an ego trip, you might as well travel first-class. So why is Kelsey Grammer, the lovable star of TV's Frasier and a man who can certainly afford luxurious accommodations, returning to Broadway in a poor man's Macbeth? As star vehicles go—and the production is without question a star vehicle—this underpopulated, underdirected and practically undesigned Macbeth is the equivalent of a dilapidated Chevy Nova. The production's paltry texture might be forgivable—or at least forgettable—if it surrounded a central performance of great insight or vitality, but Grammer's Macbeth, though handsomely and intelligently spoken, is essentially an empty star turn, a series of fancy speeches magnanimously tossed to the audience as if Director Terry Hands plays up all the most familiar conceptions about Shakespeare's briefest, bluntest tragedy. Yes, Macbeth is an unremittingly dark journey into the mind of a man seduced into evil by his ambition, so the show unfolds on a gloomy, bare stage drenched in baleful black paint. A single torch—the light of good shining bravely in a benighted world—glimmers at the back of the stage throughout the evening.

And yes, Macbeth is a zippy play (for the Bard, anyway) that moves like lightning through its bloody paces, so Hands' production proceeds at a merciless clip, coming in at two hours without an intermission. Actors all but fall over each other making entrances and exits, while the play's disturbed psychological milieu, of the natural order corrupted in extremis, is dutifully evoked by innumerable ominous thunderclaps.

But beyond its speed, darkness and portentous soundscape, Hands' Macbeth offers us little. The supporting cast is largely undistinguished, although it may be hard for even the finest actors to create credible performances with no support from evocative staging, atmosphere or even props and costumes. (The wardrobe by Timothy O'Brien, who also designed the skeletal sets, consists of contemporary pants and T-shirts, the latter mostly black, sometimes wrinkled, and on occasion dressed up with belts—a seriously unflattering look.)

As an aesthetic, minimalism requires far more imagination than Zeffirellian splendor, but there's little in evidence in this production. Less is definitely not more here: The banquet scene, a key turning point in the play, is entirely drained of its dramatic impact by the skimpy production values—this regal repast is staged with three chairs around a small round table; you half expect someone to pass around a box of Wheat Thins.

The show's stark mise-en-scene cruelly exposes its performers, who must try to evoke a complex world and a variety of relationships in brief scenes with only the help of a few spotlights. And Hands, who also designed the lighting, seems to have lavished more attention on the disposition of these spotlights than on the performances of the people trapped within them.

Diane Venora, whose Shakespearean resume includes three Public Theater Hamlets (as the prince, Ophelia and most recently Gertrude), is merely adequate as Lady Macbeth. There are no surprising colors or nuances in her portrait of a cold-blooded, grasping termagant, and her sleepwalking scene hasn't much pathos, despite some fancy vocal variations she employs and a climactic, agonized wail.

Among the supporting players, Michael Gross stands out for the innate dignity and assurance of his Ross, and Peter Gerety hardly seduces audience affection with his pungent comic turn as the drunken porter. But most of the performances are negligible, with Sam Breslin Wright's Malcolm, a key force for good against Macbeth's iniquity, coming across here as a risibly puny figure.

The title role is, of course, a dangerous seducer of ambitious actors. Macbeth is apportioned many of Shakespeare's most famous speeches ("Is this a dagger I see before me ....?" "Tomorrow and tomorrow ..."), each packed with rich imagery and beautiful phrases. And indeed, it's obviously the language that attracted Grammer to the role: He savors the monologues as if they were big pieces of rhetorical candy, delivering them
up to the audience with admirable clarity in his potent and appealing baritone. Certainly he far outshines the rest of the cast in terms of vocal grace and textual articulation.

Nevertheless, this is an inadequate performance, because it consists of nothing but prettily intoned phrases. Grammer substitutes eloquent speechifying for authentic emotional involvement in Shakespeare's potentially gripping drama of a man's moral and psychological disintegration. Although the grim set of his square jaw and a tendency to growl indicates Macbeth's increasing brutality, Grammer's usurping king never really becomes a man driven to the edge and beyond by a corrupt soul warring with the specters of remorse. A truly tormented man couldn't continue to address the audience with such consistent vocal refinement, seemingly oblivious to the emotional context of the moment.

If lackluster audiences in previews are any indication, Broadway theater-goers aren't clamoring to see how a favorite TV star fares in one of the theater's most demanding roles. And those who do venture to buy tickets may feel cheated by this uninspired production and its cheesy trappings. They'd be justified in their irritation: For a top ticket, audiences are buying the privilege of spending two hours as hostages to a star's ego.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Ben Brantley (review date 22 June 2000)**


*In the following review, Brantley commends Gregory Doran's Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production of Macbeth as insightful and assured, particularly citing the intense performances of Antony Sher and Harriet Walter as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.*

Their glittering, too-open eyes are scary, so luminous that you expect them to glow in the dark. But while the usual witches and ghosts are in attendance, it is something less supernatural that gives this power couple's gaze its intensity in the Royal Shakespeare Company's thrilling new production of *Macbeth,* which runs through Sunday at the Long Wharf Theater here.

Come now, you've seen the look that beams so unnervingly from the faces of Antony Sher and Harriet Walter, the show's splendid stars, and if you're a New Yorker, you encounter it daily. It's a ravenous, lusty look that even the most sycophantic smile can't camouflage. Stronger than any sex drive, it is pure, simple ambition, and these Macbeths are positively drunk on it.

Without making the obvious bids for topical relevance, the director, Gregory Doran, has shaped Shakespeare's tale of regicide and its discontents into a harrowing and disturbingly funny parable for the dawn of the 21st century. This *Macbeth,* which bears scant resemblance to the stodgy oratorical exercise now on Broadway under the same name, finds its taking-off point in its protagonist's declaration that he has “only vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself and falls on the other. …”

Though Macbeth famously never finishes that sentence, this adrenaline-pumping interpretation amply fills in the blank, carefully and vigorously charting the landscape where leaping ambition finally falls. That's the realm of madness of course, but I have never seen a *Macbeth* that makes such a specific and convincing case for its leading lord and lady's increasingly demented behavior as a natural outgrowth of their characters as we first see them.

Be careful what you wish for. Truman Capote, a devoted chronicler of people with warping appetites, spent his life accumulating evidence of the wisdom of that warning. Not that these Macbeths have any choice in the
matter. Their compulsiveness and their bottomless need to reach the throne are all too evident long before King Duncan (Trevor Martin) is slain.

Take, for example, the moment when Macbeth—freshly covered with laurels from his triumphs on the battlefield—appears at an assembly where the king announces his successor. Mr. Sher puffs himself like a nominee on Oscar night, clearly in anticipation of hearing his own name. And the winner is, alas, the king's son, Malcolm. For a sharp second, this Macbeth appears to have had the wind knocked out of him. But then, like many an Oscar loser, he is the first to lead the applause with a hearty smile.

In like manner, when we first see Ms. Walter's Lady Macbeth, reading aloud a letter from her husband, she runs through the text with a breathless sexual urgency; when she comes to the word “king,” in reference to the witches' prophecies for her husband, she can't even speak it at first, she's so excited. Ooo baby, we're almost there.

Mr. Sher and Ms. Walter are much celebrated for their vital portraiture on the London stage. (Mr. Sher, the better known in the States, appeared indelibly on Broadway several seasons ago in *Stanley.*) The intensity they bring to the murderous thane and his wife isn't surprising in itself. What is, is how they are able to begin at an improbable fever pitch and then keep growing hotter, moving imaginatively forward when you think they have reached a dead end.

The entire production, in New Haven as part of the International Festival of Arts and Ideas, sustains a martial urgency that only rarely slackens, underscored with propulsive drum-driven music by Adrian Lee. In keeping with the suffocating nighttime imagery woven throughout the tragedy, the evening begins in utter darkness.

The chanting weird sisters (Diane Beck, Noma Dumezweni, Polly Kemp) who begin the play are at first only seen, not heard: whispering, as it were, in our ears. The first visual image is of soldiers and of a bloodied man hurled into their midst as if by a catapult. The image is apt, since the news this man bears, of Macbeth's bloody successes on the field, sets off a missile that won't self-destruct until the evening's end, and perhaps not even then.

Mr. Sher's Macbeth is introduced as a revved-up conquering hero, borne on the shoulders of his comrades, instead of making the customary entrance with no one but Banquo (Ken Bones). This Macbeth is the image of the popular soldier: rowdy, virile, collegial.

He's a brusque, blunt-spoken type, and if you asked him, he would probably tell you he is not by nature introspective. (He treats his horror-conjuring imagination as an unwanted guest.) What makes him stand out from the crowd is his energy, which burns a shade too bright for comfort.

Ms. Walter's designing Lady is, correspondingly, a bundle of electromagnetic nerves, and it makes sense that when these two reunite, a statewide blackout follows. While some interpretations present Lady Macbeth as the prime motivator of the crimes to come, this production makes it clear that the spouses share, er, strong common interests.

Like many couples they have a seesaw relationship of support: when one's down, the other's up. That is, until the final acts, when they both come spectacularly ungled.

Mr. Doran and his team ensure that their production is not only a portrait of a marriage. Whereas I often leave a *Macbeth* hard pressed to remember who played whom in the supporting cast, this version offers a gallery of cleanly and specifically defined characters, not all of whom are immune to the plague of o'ervaulting ambition.
Mr. Bones's tough, shrewd Banquo, for example, clearly has his own mighty thirst for regal glory, a trait made to figure ominously in the evening's final tableau. And in that usually tedious scene in which the exiled Malcolm (John Dougall) and Macduff (a Sam Shepard-like Nigel Cooke) discuss the traits required for kingship, you get the idea that the passive, pure Malcolm doesn't really have what it takes.

Stephen Brimson Lewis's set designs and Tim Mitchell's lighting conspire to create a world in which a Grand Guignol darkness dominates and the fantasy of majesty glows with ecclesiastic mystery. Simple props are used to resonant poetic effect: a child's pacifier, military medals and, particularly, the king's crown. Notice also the use of Macduff's dagger in the climactic fight with Macbeth.

There are a few elements that feel overdone. Making the drunken porter an audience-baiting comic in the manner of the M.C. from *Cabaret* breaks the play's rhythm in unwelcome ways, though Stephen Noonan handles the part expertly. And Mr. Sher, whose Macbeth later assumes a gangsterish menace that recalls Bob Hoskins at his most splenetic, may be a shade too bogus in his rhetorical lamentations after the body of Duncan is discovered.

These are very small sins. In the big moments this Macbeth delivers grandly. Both the sleepwalking scene, rendered as an autistic frenzy by Ms. Walter, and the "tomorrow and tomorrow" monologue, to which Mr. Sher brings a simple, all-flattening nihilism, have the painful, grotesque immediacy of lanced blisters Even more impressive, you are always aware of the chain of emotional logic that has brought these two to this jagged point.

The evening's boldest moment, both its darkest and its brightest, comes when Macbeth and his Lady, weary with the burdens of monarchy and murder, agree that all they really need is a good night's sleep. Sleep? The very word sends them into paroxysms of laughter that fleetingly confirm the couple's bond as kindred souls Mamtaining power, as any C.E.O. or magazine editor will tell you, is a full-time job. There's no rest for the superssuccessful.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Charles Isherwood (review date 26 June 2000)**


*In the following review, Isherwood praises Gregory Doran’s Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) staging of Macbeth, singling out the portrayals of Antony Sher and Harriet Walter.*

It appears that Broadway got the wrong *Macbeth*. On the same night that Kelsey Grammer's production was opening to dismal notices in New York, the Royal Shakespeare Co. gave the first of about a dozen performances of its acclaimed new version of the tragedy as part of the New Haven Intl. Festival of Arts & Ideas.

Both productions are stark, dark and streamlined, both are performed in modern dress and without an intermission. But if the basic conceptions are similarly hued, there's a world of difference in the execution. In contrast with [Terry] Hands' desiccated, lifeless Broadway version, Gregory Doran's staging for the RSC's *Macbeth* is full-blooded and intense, compellingly alive in virtually every scene.

It's topped by a pair of riveting performances from Antony Sher and Harriet Walter as Shakespeare's famously nefarious married couple. To see Sher's blazingly, almost confusingly human Macbeth is to realize that there may be no connecting the psychological dots of this maddeningly complex character. Macbeth ricochets inconsistently between bloodthirsty acts and anguished reflection, but Sher's jittery, mesmerizing performance
makes both the bloodlust and the rhapsodic meditations seem to spring from the same roiling source as Macbeth's military prowess and ambition: a hungry heart whose feverish beating won't give him an instant's rest.

Macbeth's obsession with sleep has never seemed so heartfelt—Sher's pop-eyed Macbeth looks like he's been awake for months, permanently zonked on adrenaline to keep him battle-ready. Even in repose—as when Macbeth stands stock-still while King Duncan names his son as successor to the throne—Sher looks like he's about to jump out of his skin. And Macbeth's hysteria after killing Duncan is particularly finely rendered; it's agony to watch.

Gradually, however, the blood begins to cool, with the turning point arriving in the unexpectedly poignant wake of the banquet scene. Here, Macbeth and his equally high-strung lady cling to each other in wretchedness and exhaustion, mutually and individually taking stock of the unraveling consequences of their murderous acts. From this point on, Macbeth devolves into a coldly calculating monster, whose vestiges of humanity appear only in Sher's bleakly humorous line readings.

Lady Macbeth, ironically, moves in the opposite direction. The embrace at the close of the banquet scene seems instantly to infect Walter's implacably driven Lady M. with her husband's spectral visions—but also with his quickly evaporating humanity. She leaves the stage with candle in hand and, in one of the many felicitous linkings in Doran's staging, when we next see her she's still got the candle, but her rigid self-possession has deserted her.

Unhinged, she's finally human. Walter's sleepwalking scene is authentically haunting, not an actor's showpiece but a vivid rendering of a soul in flight from imaginary terrors born of bottomless guilt. The words spill from her in terrified spurts, and her hands pick at her gown in fluttery, birdlike movements.

The supporting cast is almost uniformly steady and at ease with the verse, with Trevor Martin's Duncan for once making the strong impression that he should. Doran's staging puts the right emphasis on his regal but benevolent nature, making the horror of his murder resonate significantly. The production's only major misstep concerns the inveterately tedious porter scene. Here, Stephen Noonan destroys the production's breathless sense of tension—and reality—with audience-baiting shtick and some shameless Clinton jokes that must have sounded fresher to English ears.

Criticism: Production Reviews: David A. Rosenberg (review date 17 January 2003)


[In the following review, Rosenberg maintains that Yukio Ninagawa's production of Macbeth was a gripping and intelligently crafted interpretation of Shakespeare's play.]

Scottish play, my eye! The Macbeth that the Ninagawa Company presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music was a fierce, exciting, harsh, and impassioned samurai drama set in a hall of mirrors that reflected not only the actors, but also the audience. As directed by Yukio Ninagawa, Shakespeare's tragedy became the story of a young couple who find themselves steeped way over their heads in blood.

This is the ultimate power duo, thrust into a chaotic world before experience can teach them how to handle their lives. As with any great work of art, the play opens up new meanings every time it's performed. Here the implication was that Macbeth is a callow, irresponsible youth whose physicality far outstrips his intellect.
The production also stressed that this is a work about fathers and sons. Bent on murdering Banquo and his son, Fleance, before they can produce heirs, or slaughtering Macduff's wife and kids, this Macbeth was a petulant, vengeful, rash adolescent. (“He has no children!” shouted Macduff upon learning of the king's crime.)

Performed in Japanese with occasionally prosaic English supertitles, the production also more than hinted about Vietnam and imperialism, of whatever nationality. The Macbeth of Toshiaki Karasawa and the Lady Macbeth of Shinobu Otake were attractive, jejune figures entangled in political situations beyond their control. But he grew in stature and emotional maturity the further into hell he went, and she morphed into a pitiful, lost woman-child. Indeed, his last speeches were spoken with repressed fear and dignity, not false bravado.

The swift production (even at three hours) was filled with striking stage pictures and spoken with the kind of guttural sounds we're used to from Japanese warrior films. Like *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa's film version of *Macbeth*, this was a roaring, action-packed, but not shallow reading of the play.

**Criticism: Themes: Garry Wills (essay date 1995)**


*[In the following essay, Wills explains obscure passages and words in Macbeth—such as the specific placement of stage directions, textual cues for clothing and props, and alternative emendations for proscribed editorial revisions—and examines the ways in which the play might have been more clearly perceived by a Jacobean audience than by a modern one.]*

Lady Macbeth asks of her evil spirits that they make her insensitive (stopping up the passages of remorse, 1.5.44), and she is relieved to see that wine contributes to that useful deadening (2.2.1). Macbeth wants his own psychic mechanism to be short-circuited. At first he simply observes that “function / Is smother'd” when his surmise leaps toward new possibilities (1.3.140-41). But he soon desires that the eye not know what the hand is up to (1.4.52), that events swallow up consequences (1.7.1-4). He marvels that acts could go forward without the spur of thought or decision (1.7.25-28). Once launched into action, he cannot look back (3.4.135-37), and he will not look any farther ahead than to the instant task, too horrible to contemplate, but not too horrible to do without contemplating it. He tells his wife to be innocent of such knowledge (3.2.45) and so far as possible keeps himself innocent of it. Bad must be treated homeopathically with further bad (3.2.55). Such cures “must be acted ere they may be scanned” (3.4.139). The first conception of the heart must leap to the hand, no sooner thought than acted (4.1.146-49).

He wants to leap into action automatically, to preclude fear, hesitation, or conscience—and he succeeds so well that the short-circuited parts of him atrophy, like an unused limb: “I have almost forgot the taste of fears” (5.5.9). He has tried to skip past time at will, out-tricking it. “Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits,” he lamented at one point (4.1.144). By speeding past time, he has eliminated it. It is no longer articulated with any meaning but mere iteration, mere empty succession (5.5.19-28).

Macbeth engages in a self-refashioning that amounts to sabotage committed upon himself. He systematically disconnects the systems of reflection. He even has a short-circuited phrase to describe what he has done to himself: “my strange and-self-abuse” (3.4.141). It is telling that he explains his actions this way even when he is lying. Asked why he killed the grooms in their sleep, he answers (2.3.110-11):

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Th' expedition of my violent love
Outrun the pauser, reason.
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The jiggering with his own psychic mechanism makes Macbeth's mind move in a blur of images, as if he were on “speed.” That makes his speeches hallucinatory, even when he is not seeing the dagger or Banquo's ghost. The words get tangled in their rush from him, in their plunge past obstacles into action. That is why the soliloquies present so many textual problems—far more than cluster in other sections of the play. We must doubt whether the text is sound in some place—unusual language is more apt to be jumbled in transmission. The “packed” quality of the speeches has led to misinterpretation as well as futile revisions.

A good example is the first speech where Macbeth discusses the jump-sequences he would like to introduce into time's flow. If the assassination could be an act out of sequence, with no antecedent or consequence, a be-all and end-all in itself, a means to the goal and the goal, so that one is contained in the other (a success by mere surcease)—then—what? Then, according to 1.7.5-7 (in the Folio),

But here, upon this bank and school of time,
We'd jump the life to come.

How does one jump from a bank and school? Almost all editors adopt Theobald's famous emendation of school to shoal—disastrously, I believe.

Shoal means shallow water, as in “sounded all the depths and shoals of honor’ (Henry VIII 3.2.436). How does one jump from the bank and the water? Theobald tried to make shoal mean “passage through shallow water,” or ford: “this shallow, this narrow ford, of human life.” So one jumps from the bank to the ford to what? One should arrive at the opposite shore, not avoid it, yet “jump” mean “skip over” or “cancel” here, not jump to or achieve. The picture is too jumbled to bear thought.1

What can be made of school if that is retained? Heath (see Variorum) wanted “bank-and-school” to mean “bench-in-school,” which goes nicely with the later “teach bloody instructions” but not so well with “jump the life to come.” What help is the physical furniture of a schoolroom to that process (whatever it is)? No one I know of has suspected that the corruption may be in bank, not school. F’s “Banke,” with capital B, could well be a setter's misunderstanding of “Ranke.” We read at Lear 2.4.258 that not being vicious “Stands in some rank [kind or category] of praise.” It is the usage that survives in “rank and file.” A rank of time would be some category of time. School, then, would not be the physical building (with benches in it) but a body of interpretation, like “school of night” at Love’s Labour’s 4.3.251. “This rank-and-school of time” would be the kind-and-view of time suggested by what immediately precedes. “This” is a resumptive reference back, not a physical marker.

What was “this” interpretation of time? That it ended each act with the act, rather than leading on to consequences. If one could believe that, then (upon this view of time) one could skip or cancel succeeding time. It would be canceled by the surcease of the self-contained act. For jump as skip or cancel, see Cymbeline 5.4.179-82: “You must either be directed … or jump the after-inquiry on your peril” (another passage having to do with instruction).

But then Macbeth reflects that it is not so simple. He wants an exempt time, sealed off from the flow of time, in which to commit a consequence-less murder—like the exempt space marked out by the conjurer’s circle, one that seals its ambit off from God’s providential order all around the circle. But time flows on into consequential acts: murder calls for retaliation. The interpretation of time as making a single act “the be-all and the end-all here, but here” is not tenable. That “school of time” comes up against the fact that “We still have judgment here” [not surcease “here but here”]. We give others “bloody instruction”—to kill in return, just as Campion’s “bloody questions” called for a self-killing response. The passage should be emphasized this way:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If th' assassination
Could trammel up the consequence and catch,
With his surcease, success—that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here!—upon this rank and school of time
We'd jump the life to come. But …

This is just the first of three difficult passages in this soliloquy. The second one is the famous “new-born babe” sequence, much discussed and argued over. Cleanth Brooks gave the passage an exhaustive “new criticism” analysis, connecting the babe with every other reference to children or male adulthood in Macbeth. Helen Gardner responded that Brooks had made the passage more, not less, obscure. Kenneth Muir tried to reconcile the work of his fellow critics. And the battles go on.

The passage is difficult. No phrase in it but has caused problems.

And pity like a naked new-born babe
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.

It may help to take minor points first, since they can give clues to harder matters.

1. How do “tears drown the wind”? Most editors take “drown” to mean “kill by immersion,” and conclude that, in Johnson's words, there is “remission of the wind in a shower.” That does not seem to be a meteorological fact, and it fits ill the context: passions should be raised, not allayed, by revelation of the regicide. Actually, “drown” can mean simply “drench” or “flood,” as in a passage with strong similarities to this one, Hamlet 2.2.562ff., where Hamlet says that a real (not a feigned) murder would drown the stage with tears, and cleave the general ear with horrid speech. 

There is no question of killing the stage by immersion. So, in our passage, tears will drench the wind, be swirled along in them. Hamlet's actor splits ears with horrid speech; Macbeth's angels blow the horrid deed in every—eye, not ear. In both cases, horrifying testimony to a crime is delivered.

2. Why are the winds “sightless”? Muir, in his edition, glossed the word as invisible—which is clearly what it means at 1.5.49 (demons’ “sightless substance”). But he changed his mind when editing King Lear, where winds snatch at Lear's hair “with eyeless rage” (3.1.8). Winds, which make people close their eyes, may be thought of as sightless—putti in the corners of old pictures, representing the four winds, sometimes close their eyes while puffing out their cheeks to blow.

3. How do angels blow a deed into eyes? Portents and apparitions mark the death of kings. The angels can either cause these portents, or be these portents. If the latter is the case, then the coursers cannot be sightless in the sense of invisible. We are dealing with visual evidence, not acoustic. I mentioned earlier that “blowing” was a charged word in the Gunpowder Plot days, related to the imagined portent of royal limbs flying through the air. The Plot was foiled, and that evidence had to be imagined; but Macbeth is supposing that Duncan's death does occur, and he fears what portents will follow. Some portents do, in fact, occur when the murder has been committed—an owl brings down a falcon, and horses go wild (2.4.11-18). The heavens protest what has been done on earth (lines 5-6):

Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man's act,
Threatens his bloody stage.
Macbeth is imagining some such revelation of the crime from above.

4. What is the division of labor between the babe and the cherubim? None, says Gardner—they are both symbols of innocence. She mocks Brooks's treatment of the babe as Pity and the cherubim as Vengeance. But cherubs can be judges—Hamlet threatens Claudius with the cryptic remark that he (Hamlet) sees a cherub who reads his (Claudius's) mind (4.3.48). Brooks rightly contrasts the babe, whose powerlessness is emphasized (it is not only new-born but naked), with powerful coursers guided by angels. The messengers seem fitted to give different testimony, raising pity and fear, just as Hamlet's imagined actor, with his “horrid speech,” can “make mad the guilty, and appall the free [from guilt].” Pity is paired by contrast with threats at Comedy of Errors 1.1.10 and Coriolanus 1.6.36.

5. What is a “naked new-born babe” doing out in a cruel blast of air? The babe stands on the blast, bestrides it in that sense. (The moon bestrides a cloud at Romeo 2.2.31 and Margaret says at III Henry VI 5.4.31: “Bestride the rock, the tide will wash you off”). The cherubim guide their coursers. The babe just stands helpless in the storm. This is a powerful image, and it was given powerful expression in a poem printed four years before Macbeth was performed. Robert Southwell's “The Burning Babe” has these features in common with Shakespeare's image. The babe is “newly born.” It “did in the air appear”—cf. “striding the blast.” It sheds “floods of tears”—cf. “drown with tears.” It makes “mercy blow the coals”—cf. “blow the deed.” The babe seems to be naked in the cold—it displays its “faultless breast.” Southwell's poem hangs the Christ child in the air over a wintry Christmas scene to have its heat of love melt the viewer's cold heart. Justice lights fires of vengeance which the babe's melting love puts out—as Shakespeare's babe offers compassion alongside the cherubim's justice. The blood that melts into the fire and puts it out fuses the image of the babe in the air and Christ hung on the cross—another meeting of mercy and justice.

I do not think that Shakespeare is imitating Southwell, but the extraordinary conjunction of similar elements suggests that Shakespeare may have been nudged by Southwell's poem toward this particular symbol of mercy and pity. Shakespeare's babe is not the Christ child. It is Pity in a personified form. But the iconography is the same.

As I in hoary winter's night
Stood shivering in the snow,
Surpris'd I was with sudden heat
Which made my heart to glow.

And lifting up a fearful eye
To view what fire was near,
A pretty Babe all burning bright
Did in the air appear.

Who, scorched with excessive heat,
Such floods of tears did shed.
As though his floods should quench his flames
Which with his tears were fed.

"Alas," quoth he, "but newly born,
In fiery heats I fry;
Yet none approach to warm their hearts,
Or feel my fire, but I.

My faultless breast the furnace is,
The fuel wounding thorns.
Love is the fire, and sighs the smoke.
The ashes, shame and scorns.

The fuel Justice layeth on,
And Mercy blows the coals.
The metal, in the furnace wrought,
Are men's defiled souls—

For which, as now on fire I am
To work them to this good,
So will I melt into a bath
To wash them in my blood.

With this he vanish’d out of sight,
And swiftly shrunk away.
And straight I called unto mind
That it was Christmas day.(7)

The difficulties in Macbeth's Act One, Scene Seven soliloquy continue to the very end, in these possibly corrupt lines (1.7.25-28):

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps, itself,
And falls on th' other.

By contrast with the racing cherubim on their couriers, Macbeth is stalled. He cannot prod on his intent. The natural thing is to take itself as the object of o'erleaps, though a thing that can jump over itself belongs in the poems of Edward Lear not of William Shakespeare. Ambition needs no spurs—it leaps of itself, unprompted. What is the other that ambition falls on? Most people, trying to make sense of a jump over itself, have ambition fall down on some other—a horse on its rider, or a rider on the other side of the horse, etc. These are not convincing pictures. It is better to take “fall on” as “attack”—

The bold young men that, when he bids 'em charge,
Fall on like fire.(8)

Macbeth says he has no spur to guide a rational intent. All he has—and he is at the moment too wise to accept it—is a berserk ambition that spontaneously goes too far (o'erleaps) and attacks anything in its way (any “other”). That is not entirely convincing, and that last line should perhaps be athetized in a critical edition. But earlier interpretations seem even less tenable.

The nervous telegraphic style of Macbeth's speech deserves fuller study; but enough has been looked at to indicate the blowing of his linguistic fuses as he forces himself on into dreadful action, doing violence to “the pauser, reason.”

In the last act, some of Macbeth's words are obscure. But his actions also seem mysterious in the Folio text and directions. In Act Five, Scene Three he asks for his armor, and Seyton says, “‘Tis not needed yet,” but Macbeth will put it on anyway. Fourteen lines later he says, “Come, put my armor on; give me my staff.” Six lines after that: “Pull't off [his armor?], I say.” Four lines on: “Bring it [the armor?] after me.” He exits, presumably still unarmored. Not till the end of Scene Five does he say, “Arm! Arm! And out!” Then, six lines later, he says: “At least we'll die with harness on our back.” Most directors have Macbeth arm between scenes, but that seems to destroy the point (whatever it is) of his alternating resolution and reluctance in arming.9 What stage business do these various starts and stops indicate?

Ever since Caroline Spurgeon's 1935 book Shakespeare's Imagery drew attention to the language about Macbeth's clothes—too alien, too large, too strange to fit him—directors have tried various ways of suggesting that their actor wears “borrowed robes” (1.3.109). Olivier came out in a large robe in the discovery scene after the murder and tried to “lose” his recently bloodied hands in it.10 Welles wore a crown that looked
too large for his head. Trevor Nunn gave Duncan a huge priest-like cope which is carried or stationed near Macbeth when he is not wearing it, a shining symbol of the kingship he never quite makes his own.

The elaborate business with the armor, the circling of the language back to images of clothing, the general importance of emblematic costume on Shakespeare's stage—and especially of a king's emblematic dress—indicate that Macbeth's robing is important. We see him go from soldier to courtier to king to conjurer and back to soldier.

It is instructive to look at other scenes where there is important business having to do with costume. In The Tempest, Prospero's cloak is an important prop. He must take it off to speak as a man and father (“Pluck my magic garment from me,” 1.2.24) and resume it to compel the spirits. Faustus's cloak was important in Philip Henslowe's inventory (see Frontispiece). The actor Richard Alleyn first appeared as Faustus in clerical garb, a surplice with a cross on his breast. But after his contract with the devil is signed, the evil spirits bring him “rich apparel” and clothe him in it (Doctor Faustus A2.1.82-84).

But the most spectacular use of raiment is evident in the other play in the Shakespeare troupe's repertory of 1607, Barnes's The Devil's Charter. The play opens with Alexander being robed in the panoply of a pope. That the robe is an evil conjurer's is shown by the fact that the devils put it on him and then give him a magic book (like the book Mephistopheles brings to Faustus). As the chorus of the play put it (lines 70-71):

Satan, transfigur'd like a protonotary,
To him makes offer of the triple crown.

Later, when Alexander conjures, he resumes the robe and takes up the book, while telling an acolyte to put on his vestments (lines 1851-72). At the end of the play, we see Alexander sitting “unbraced” in his study, trying ineffectually to repent. Then he rises, goes to the curtain over the inner chamber, and pulls it aside—to reveal the devil throned and wearing Alexander's pontificals (lines 3339-42). It is a splendid coup de théâtre. Alexander knows he has lost all his power, now that the devil has reclaimed his proper garb (lines 3545-47).

Barnes's play is full of references to clothes, to things like Alexander's “cloaking” of his vices. And Caesar, his son, throws off his own clerical robes to show he is wearing armor underneath. The other Gunpowder play of 1606, Dekker's The Whore of Babylon, also used papal robes for the Whore's pompous court. Both Dekker and Barnes show the conjunction of papal and witch-like powers in the wizard's cloak. Another attribute of the wizard is his wand, or staff, or rod—the wand we see Faustus wield in the illustration to the 1616 Quarto, the staff Mephistopheles wields at B3.2.16; the staff Prospero must break when he abjures his magic (Tempest 5.1.54), the rod that Merlin uses to quell his enemies in The Birth of Merlin.

Given the expectations of a context where conjuring and witchcraft have been so important, it astonishes me that no one has suggested that the staff Macbeth calls for at 5.3.48 is a magic staff. Editors call it “either a weapon or a staff of office” (Brooke). How does one identify it as either from its appearance? There would be no problem identifying a magic staff from its association with a wizard's cloak—and that is just what Beerbohm Tree (in 1911) had Hecate's spirits put on Macbeth at the end of the necromancy scene, where the spirits come to restore his confidence. We have seen the precedent for this. Faustus, too, after his commerce with the devil, feels weak and regretful—so the devils dance for him and give him rich apparel, the wizard's garb that replaces his clerical garb. I suggest that Hecate's spirits do the same for Macbeth. The stage direction was lost at the same time Hecate's expanded song was added to the play (to be cued in short form by the Folio).
When Macbeth comes to the necromancy, he asks the witches to conjure for him in his own witch-speech. But he is, at this stage, still an initiate brought to his first conjuring—like the Duchess of Gloucester in II Henry VI. After his participation, he is both privileged and damned, given powers that will self-destruct. Just before his next appearance, before the only two scenes where he can wear the mantle, we hear Angus compare his title to “a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfed thief” (5.2.21-22).

The robe would look like a king's robe. Monarchs had emblems on their apparel—like the zodiacal signs and mystical symbols on Elizabeth's garment in the Rainbow Portrait, painted circa 1603, or the wondrous cloak of mirrors put on Edward III.16 The Titania (Elizabeth) whose court is contrasted with Rome's in Dekker's Whore has a “faery” court where symbols of “good” magic and providential order are contrasted with the trappings of the Beast's kingdom.

The magic cloak of Macbeth the conjurer may even help clear up a textual dispute. At 5.3.21, the Folio has Macbeth say, “‘This push / Will cheere me ever, or dis-eate me now.” Editors regularly alter “cheere” to “chair,” so it will match “dis-seat.” But the push is Macbeth's, not a challenger's—as it should be if a push, by failing, lets him keep his chair. He is not taking it. If we keep the text, with his garment in mind, it would remind us of the reason he was given it by Hecate (4.1.127):

Come, sisters, cheer we up his sprites!

What becomes, then, of the emphatically syllabified “dis-eate,” a non-word? Many since Rowe have accepted the Second Folio's “dis-ease.” Compare Chapman's “dis-ease” when he had Mercury take away the ease of sleep:

Then up his rod went, with which he declin'd
The eyes of any waker when he pleas'd,
And any sleeper, when he wish'd, dis-eased.(17)

Macbeth's loss will take away the cheering ease the witches brought him.

The long business with the armor reflects Macbeth's reluctance to surrender his robe and staff. He asks for armor, then says instead, “Give me my staff.” There are two possibilities in what follows. Either he says “Pull't off, I say” of his cloak—like Prospero's “Pluck my magic garment from me”—and then says “bring it after me” of the cloak. Or he begins to arm, stops, and says, “Bring the armor after me.”

I prefer the second choice. It takes Macbeth into a third scene wearing his cloak. He disrobes in the gathering doubts that follow on reports of his wife's death—perhaps during the “Tomorrow and tomorrow” speech. He becomes only a man again, like Prospero without his wand, like Faustus and Alexander trying to repent. Then he calls up his manic courage and arms with a desperate glee (5.5.51): “At least we'll die with harness on our back.”

The “Tomorrow and tomorrow” speech (5.5.19-28) is a confession that Macbeth has been all too successful in canceling time. He has turned it into a meaningless succession of sameness. If conjuring is an attempt to master time and space by stepping outside both, to exert a power over the universe, this is a speech of supreme powerlessness.18 Its weary cadence seems to be an inversion of the message of Psalm 19 (verses 2 and 4):

Day unto day uhattreth the same
And night unto night teacheth knowledge. ... 
Their line is gone forth through all the earth,
And their words unto the ends of the world.(19)
Yet Macbeth still clings to belief in his own preternatural immunities. He has a pledge on the future, what he called “a bond of fate” (4.1.84). Two impossibilities protect him—no man born of woman can kill him, and Birnam Wood must walk. But the fated end of contracting with the devil is to see that the contract was a trick. The assurance turns into a trap. As the Gunpowder Plotters saw their own scheme recoil upon them (those who dug the pit falling into it), so Macbeth finds that there was a meaning to the pledges that he did not grasp.

In both cases, it is a meaning traditional to witchcraft. Making woods move is a part of the witches’ regular impossibilities (*adyntata*). Even Macbeth hinted at this in his conjuring speech. Classical witches regularly boast *Et silvas moveo*. Macbeth should have suspected such portents, however contrived. He had said himself, “Stones have been known to move and trees to speak” (3.4.122).

The other portent is also traditional with witches. They especially prize unbaptized infants for creating spells. They steal them from cribs or ditches where they die. They even rip them from pregnant corpses, as Lucan said in the passage used by Marston for the necromancy scene in *Sophonisba*.

Volnere sic ventris, non qua natura vocabat,  
Extrahitur partus, calidis ponendus in aris. (20)  
By a stab to the womb, in a way nature never indicated,  
The child is torn out to be offered on the flaming altar.

This is a passage Ben Jonson cited in his notes to *The Masque of Queens*.21

The witches formed their riddles in ways that could turn backwards on their victim. When the portents come true, however, it is not by some preternatural intrusion into the order of nature. The walking wood and man not born are *fake* miracles, as it were—natural events masquerading in odd language. The witches are equivocators in the most thoroughgoing way. Like the Jesuits, they use words that are true at some level but not in the way that their victim could understand. They “keep the word of promise to our ear / And break it to our hope” (5.8.21-22). It is what Banquo had predicted on the heath (1.3.123-26):

And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,  
The instruments of Darkness tell us truths,  
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's  
In deepest consequence.

The unnatural thing is not Birnam Wood's moving or Macduff's non-birth birth, but the unnatural (Jesuitical) language of the witches, the destruction of reality in *words* misused. No wonder Macbeth says, when the wood moves, “I pale in resolution, and begin / To doubt th' equivocation of the fiend” (5.5.41-42).22

But Macbeth fights on, relying on the other portent, which is harder to fulfill in any conceivable natural sense. He can still boast to Macduff, “I bear a charmed life.” The charm is the magic spell woven around him by the witches in the necromancy scene. The marking off of “charmed” ground has occurred many times in the play—on the heath as the witches circled Macbeth, in “hell” as the Porter circled his imagined Jesuit, in the necromancy scene, in the fake spell cast by Malcolm on Macduff. The actual geometry of magic figures on the ground is important to scenes like those of Faustus's and Pope Alexander's conjuring or in the marked arena of Faustus's witchcraft illustrated in the 1620 Quarto (see Frontispiece). We should suppose that the charmed circle is a spot still definite on the stage as Macbeth, stripped of followers, retreats to his last redoubt of magic. Imagine him taking up that position as he prepares to kill Siward. His circle has become the ambit of a bear staked for baiting (5.7.1-2):

They have tied me to a stake. I cannot fly  
But bearlike I must fight the course.
The bear is circumscribed, and his circle can contract if the chain winds around the pole as he turns and backs away from baiting dogs; but Macbeth still sees it as a circle of power, and he kills young Siward with fiendish energy. The charges of diabolic power are made both by Siward and, especially, by Macduff: “Turn, hellhound!” (5.8.3). The bravery of young Siward and of Macduff cannot properly be gauged unless we take seriously the hellish aspect of Macbeth's power. These men are in the position of desperate pursuers who must “take on” a vampire in Dracula movies. Macduff acts like an exorcist (5.8.13-15):

And let the Angel whom thou still hast serv'd
Tell thee ... Despair thy charm!

Macduff forces Macbeth out of his charmed circle—which explains the odd Folio direction: Exeunt fighting. Alarums. Enter fighting, and Macbeth slain. This breaks Poel's Rule against actors' exiting and immediately re-entering. It has been plausibly suggested that Macbeth is forced out on the lower stage and reappears on the upper level, where the business of beheading him after he falls can more easily be feigned. The retreat to higher inner levels of a castle was a familiar concept to the audience—as if the bear's ambit were narrowing and narrowing around his stake—and the head could be brandished from the balcony as from battlements (Welles filmed it that way). The spell is broken, the circle shattered. “The time is free.”

Notes

1. Defenses of “shoal” get desperate. Brooke writes “reference to the sea [!] springs from the fishing sense of ‘trammel.’” But “trammel” was used more of netting animals on land than of netting fish.
6. It is interesting that all the critics refer to the babe as “he,” though the virtues were normally female when personified. Blake, too, made the babe male in his large color print illustrating the passage. For a discussion of Blake’s “Pity,” see Jonathan Bate, Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination (Clarendon Press, 1989), 125-27.
7. The Poems of Robert Southwell, S.J., edited by James H. McDonald and Nancy Pollard Brown (Clarendon Press, 1967), 15-16. For date of the poem's publication, see pp. lxv and 124. The text available to Shakespeare in 1602 mistakenly printed “bred” for “fed” at the end of the third stanza. Christopher Devlin argued, on no very good evidence, that Southwell and Shakespeare were friends (The Life of Robert Southwell, 1956). But it is likely that Shakespeare knew the Jesuit's poems—there was a vogue for them just after the 1595 execution. It was the eighth edition of his poems in which “The Burning Babe” appeared (in 1602). See McDonald and Brown, op.cit., lv-lxvi.
8. Two Noble Kinsmen 2.2.249-50.
9. I suspect that the troupe had at the time a fine costume of armor that fit Burbage, since there is an elaborate arming scene in the contemporary Antony 4.4.1-18.
12. Ibid., 49.
14. It would have been theatrically effective to have the Whore (who was also the Pope) played by a man—to emphasize his unnatural aspect (the effect Shakespeare achieves with his witches played by men).

15. Rosenberg, 510.


17. George Chapman, *Homer's “Odysseus”* 5.66-68. Cf. the similar use of “mis-ease” at 13.139. For the hyphen in dis-ease, see F's “dis-heartens” at *Macbeth* 2.3.33.

18. The two lines preceding make no sense as normally delivered:

> She should have died hereafter,
> There would have been a time for such a word.

Editors take this to mean, “I am too distracted to mourn now. If she died later, I could take in the meaning of that event.” But (1) he does not know there will be a later occasion, (2) “There would have been a time” seems to look to the past, not the future, and (3) Macbeth goes on to say there will be no special time to be marked in the future (made up of featureless tomorrows) or the past (yesterdays lighting fools). If the future and past are ruled out, only the present is left as a “time for such a word.” But he is saying that no time is a right time any more, distinguishable from other times. No *kairos* will exist for him, ever again. Then why does he say, “There would have been a time”? The first two lines must be questions, to which the rest of the speech gives a despairing answer:

> She should have died hereafter [in the future]?
> There would have been time for such a word [in the past]?
> [“No” understood]. Tomorrow, and...

19. The Geneva translation of 1560. The Psalms are the part of the Bible most echoed in Shakespeare. Richmond Noble wrote that “there is not a play in the Folio entirely free from a suggestion of a use of the Psalms” (*Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge* (Octagon Books reprint, 1970), 47).


22. “I pull in resolution” of F calls for a metrically clumsy emphasis on *in* to get either of the two suggested and contrary meanings (“I inhale new resolution,” or “I limit my former resolution”). Johnson suggested *pall*, but *pale* is as easy a setter's slip, and paling has been a regular theme in the play: “look so green and pale” (1.7.37); “wear a heart so white” (2.2.64); “bond which keeps me pale” (3.2.50); “look not so pale” (5.1.63); “cream-fac’d” (5.3.11); “linen cheeks” (5.3.16); “whey-face” (5.3.17).

**Criticism: Themes: Tzachi Zamir (essay date summer 2000)**


[In the following essay, Zamir considers the thematic contrast between Macbeth's nihilistic preoccupation with the absence of value and temporality and Macduff's emotional and highly temporal existentialism. For the critic, Macbeth serves as an example of the significant role that literary texts can play in the didactic representation of fundamental philosophical concerns.]

They thought him honest and they “loved him well,” a valiant, worthy gentleman. A brave man, the bridegroom of Bellona, the Roman war goddess. He won “golden opinion from all sorts of people.” But all that changed. Instead, he became despised for his treachery and feared for actions that know no moral bounds.
From murdering his king to killing his past friends and from that to infanticide, Macbeth's story, at least from the perspective of others, is one of a change in reputation. From his own point of view—an outlook which never experiences a good name or, for that matter, any other thing as an accomplishment—things are somewhat more complicated than a simple story of loss.

There is something hollow in Macbeth. What is missing is not motivation for his actions—his “vaulting ambition” is supposed to cover that—but a sense of motivational depth. What worries us as we read the play is, I think, the emptiness of Macbeth's ambition. He wants to be king, that much is certain. This desire, however, was not always in him. It overtook him only when a possibility appeared. The problem is not with the overwhelming nature of his ambition. The alien quality of Macbeth lies, rather, in the way in which he never enjoys his accomplishments. There is never happiness or satisfaction in the man. Not when he returns triumphant from fighting Macdonald. Not when he becomes a king. Not when he secures his reign. He never hints how he wishes to put to use the power he so desperately wants to have. Like Richard III, Macbeth never dwells on the object of his ambitions. However, whereas in the former one detects an unmistakable delight that accompanies his villainies, a sense of the proud performer calling attention to the atrocities he commits, Macbeth remains an unhappy, frightened man. One wonders why it was that he wanted to become a king in the first place.

Nihilism—that, I shall soon argue, is the philosophical concern that underlies Macbeth—could be presented as a philosophical position. A nihilist rejects any process in which “things”—states of affairs, feelings, lives, actions, dispositions—are endowed with value. The position could take the form of dismissing any criteria according to which values may be ascribed. Another route is through showing that value is always relative to some perspective which one has no reason to privilege. At its extreme, the position seems irrefutable. The argument would be that since philosophical discussion is limited to rational debate, the best philosophy can do in answering a nihilist is to show that ascribing value is a rational—justified, beneficial, end-serving—act. However, philosophy is reduced to silence if the value of rationality—or the value of always being rational—is questioned. Put differently, since a nihilist would have to acknowledge the value of rational debate in order to listen to philosophy at all, an extreme nihilist who refuses to grant this presupposition would always win.

The impasse philosophy leads to when foundational questions of value arise should make us look hard for alternatives. Turning to literary works is one such route. In a discussion of Richard III, I argued that the play enables a deeper grasp of the sort of ethical skepticism it depicts. “Deep” there meant that through portraying a plausible existential framework in which immorality becomes an explicit choice, literature forces us to go beyond the sort of hypothetical smiling skeptic that haunts philosophy and that one never in fact meets. We grasp the intellectual and emotional underpinnings of moral skepticism as it arises in a life-like situation. We get to know how it is experienced and through such understanding get to experience the sort of impotence that consists in an inability to ultimately ground a condemnation of intentionally chosen villainy. However, whereas in that work the contributions of Shakespeare's text to philosophy are limited to understanding, in Macbeth we approach something close to a philosophical confrontation.

The first sections of this paper try to work out the details of a full vision of nihilism. The stress is not on the “position” as it is argued for, but rather on the psychological and existential aspects with which nihilism is connected when it plausibly emerges in a life. Through contrasting nihilism with its opposite, Shakespeare achieves one of the strongest moments of the play. In the closing sections I shall inquire into this contrast not only in aesthetic terms but mainly in terms of the way it creates a philosophically formative experience. The more abstract considerations that underlie this reading regarding the general relations between philosophy and literature will be presented in the end. I shall claim that some of the criticism that has been very recently leveled at the idea of ethical criticism can be avoided through endorsing a different understanding from the one we so far have regarding the links between philosophy and literature. More specifically, instead of regarding literature's unique contributions to moral understanding as stemming from a greater ability to focus
on the particular, we should look for literature's nonparaphrasable contributions in terms of different qualitative structuralizations of knowledge. Changing the focus from ethics to epistemology would enable proponents of the ethical approach to maintain the idea of nonreducible ethical insight that some literary works yield, and yet avoid the risk of endorsing a pedantic, pre-Formalist conception of literature.

POSTPONING

Let me begin with some of Macbeth's more revealing lines near the end of the play when he hears of his wife's death and his nihilism emerges as an explicit position:

SEYTON:
The queen, my lord, is dead.

MACBETH:
She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word—
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle,
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.

(5.5.17-28)

We may see how, apart from the surface sense of a general belittling of life, the details of this speech expose some of the finer aspects of Macbeth's nihilism. The traditional signifier-referent hierarchy underlies life's shadowy insignificance for Macbeth. But more than a chain of sounds that signify nothing, life's empty value results from such sounds being part of "a tale" conducted on a "stage." The histrionic, fictional context turns life from a chain of meaningless sounds into a semantic procession that is also charged with being ontologically inferior ("a walking shadow"). Even this, though, is not enough as the tale is being told by "an idiot," the living are all "fools," and so life ends up being not only a valueless copy, but also one which is foolishly tailored. In explaining these lines from the perspectives of an actor, Ian McKellen has ingeniously noted that, as the reference to the "poor actor" is actually mouthed by an actor, Shakespeare here enables the theatrical to merge into the real. A real actor has to give voice to lines that reflect on the temporal limitations of his effects before reaching the nihilistic conclusion.
Let us avoid the temptation to reduce all this to a philosophical position and instead move closer to the existential subtleties that make up this nihilism. If Macbeth ever cared for anything outside him, it is for his wife. However, hearing of her death he scolds her for dying at a time in which an approaching battle precludes mourning for her. More than signifying a simple lack of feeling (one suspects that, too), Macbeth says that dying at the right time would have enabled emotion to take place. It is not so much the possible belief in an ability to postpone feelings which should mainly interest us here, but the very idea of postponing as well as the connections the speech draws between postponing and nihilism. Consulting the temporal structure can yield insight into these links. We note that life's petty pace does not merely creep in day after day, but tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. Macbeth first seems to be referring to life's petty stuff. However, the “this” in “this petty pace” also refers to the triple tomorrow of the previous line. The meaningless pace is thought oriented toward a future, a tomorrow. The speech thereby connects its semiotic theme with its temporal one in that in both, the given (present, word, sound) points beyond itself. In both, the end is either a dusty death, to which all yesterdays point (“light”), or a nonexistent referent. Times and signs point beyond themselves to nothing and enable a phenomenology of nihilism to surface. Nihilism is not merely an experience in which things are seen as valueless, but an avoidance.

Postponement is introduced in Macbeth's first (interrupted) aside in his “nothing is but what is not.” The oxymoron is supposed to capture thought smothered by “horrible imaginings” and “surmise” (1.3.140-44). The real and substantial in thought (“present fears”) gives way to the possible and hypothetical. To those who look at him in his rapt state, he makes the excuse that he was thinking of “things forgotten.” Lost in a future or a past, Macbeth's brand of nihilism involves circumventing times and things, a process that enables maintaining the belief in their worthlessness (the scene ends, incidentally, several lines later, when Macbeth postpones his talk with Banquo to a more appropriate time). A somewhat different sort of dismissal of the present resurfaces in Macbeth's aside when he decides to kill Banquo. The fact that the witches predicted that it is the latter's issue and not Macbeth who will be kings not only empties Macbeth's actual, present accomplishment in his own eyes, but causes a fascinating shift in his own self-narrative:

... Then prophet-like,
They [the witches] hailed him father to a line of kings.
Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown,
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,
Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,
No son of mine succeeding; if't be so,
For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind,
For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered,
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace
Only for them, and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man,
To make them kings, the seeds of Banquo kings.

(3.1.58-69)

Gone is his earlier admittance that he operates solely from “vaulting ambition.” He talks as if he murdered Duncan just for the sake of his own future children. Such remotivation and recasting of personal history reveals the mechanics of postponement and the strategies through which nihilism works. Deferring the experience of an achieved accomplishment is produced not only through endlessly relegating value to the future, but also through positing the accomplishment in a broader context than the one that would have conferred value upon it. The accomplishment becomes a means rather than the end it was initially conceived to be, and nihilism is enabled through this instrumentalization and value diminishing.⁶

I wish to return to Macbeth's relation to temporality.⁷ Lady Macbeth, so in tune with her husband, imparts the same sort of relation to time in her first words to him as they first meet: “Thy letters have transported me beyond / This ignorant present, and I feel now / The future in the instant” (1.5.55-57). Then she makes the
interesting instruction to him that in order “to beguile the time, / Look like the time, bear welcome in your
eye, / Your hand your tongue …”(1.5.63-65). We shall shortly explore the reference to hands. But for the
moment note the identification of time with the entire social context the Macbeths need to deceive. The
instruction itself, describing the hypocritical acting she asks him to perform in terms of a simile between him
and time is intriguingly complicated in terms of coherence between rhetorical and thematic concerns. Lady
Macbeth employs the figure as part of what seems to be a simple opposition between appearance and reality
that structures her lines (“… look like th’innocent flower, / But be the serpent und’r’t”). However, looking
like—later confirmed by his “Away, and mock the time with fairest show” (1.7.82)—is opposed to a sense of
Macbeth’s self that is itself expressed metaphorically rather than literally. Moreover, being the metaphorical
“serpent” underneath is not a description of who and what Macbeth is, but an instruction. She both
semantically and rhetorically avoids what she believes him to actually be: a highly ambitious man who is yet
“too full o’th’ milk of human kindness.”

The more one reads the play the more one suspects that she deeply misreads her husband and that these lines
are, rather, a projection of her own submerged morality. Except from the moments directly after he murders
Duncan, and his attempt to avoid fighting Macduff at the very end of the play, Macbeth is not that worried
about the immorality of his actions, while she certainly is. Her moral scruples and ultimate collapse further
on in the play turns her alarmingly cold lines in the opening act into a mode of collecting herself rather than
an expression of unequivocal villainy. I am thinking here of the lines that all commentators cite:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty …
Come to my woman’s breasts
And take my milk for gall …

(1.5.39-47)

Or the savage

I have given suck, and know
How tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me;
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.

(1.7.54-59)

We shall later return to these lines and the way in which they connect the unsettling of gender categories with
emotion (which might also explain why they are cited so often). For now, returning to the theme of
temporality, asking him to place himself beside the time and only look like it, parallels through rhetoric the
relations between Macbeth and time, more specifically, his own avoidance of his time. All three lines
Macbeth speaks through this entire scene are set in the future tense. We also note what should by now seem
unremarkable: after she asks him to set himself by time and resemble it, Macbeth replies by asking her to
postpone talk (“We will speak further”).

CIRCUMVENTING

The last route I wish to discuss regarding postponement is through the play on the spatial and temporal “here”
in Macbeth’s deliberation before the murder:
If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly; if th'assassination
Could trammel up the consequence and catch
With his surcease, success, that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all—here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgement here, that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which being taught, return
To plague th'inventor. This even-handed justice
Commends th'ingredience of our poisoned chalice
To our own lips. He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman, and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself.

(1.7.1-16)

The first lines are hypothetical deliberations regarding a possible future as well as expressing the desire to have the future controlled. The first three uses of “here” designate a future-oriented present. The fourth and last “here” refers to relations that do actually obtain: Duncan being his guest and his king. “Here” usually designates self-situating. Shakespeare uses the word three times to paradoxically repeat Macbeth’s avoidance of his present. This observation should be coupled with two thematic ones. First, in this speech, what are presented as his (present) obligations to Duncan flow into and are actually a part of what he sees as the case for his afterlife punishment. Second, Macbeth would soon decide to disregard the fourth use of “here” which does acknowledge the actual—his obligations to Duncan—in favor of possible success. This resets the same pattern; that of a present giving way to a future. Macbeth hardly sees what he has and what he is. (Postponement is also, incidentally, the fault for which his wife immediately blames him [1.7.51-54].)

Beyond simple avoidance of one’s time, these lines further complicate Macbeth’s relation to temporality by situating him outside time’s flow. Upon a bank and shoal of time, stands this man and contemplates whether to jump the life to come. Like “here,” the indexical “this” is self-situating, the importance of which should not escape us. In the context of deferring the actual, we meet a figurative self-placing altogether outside time. More than alienating Macbeth further from his time, the figure articulates, I think, not only the noninvested way by which nihilism relates to life, but also the attitude of relating to life as if plunging into it is some kind of a decision that awaits the proper justification. Shakespeare also captures here the fear of losing control and connects it to nihilism. Such employment of the psychological coheres with the way in which the experience of life as valueless is not depicted in this play merely as an intellectual position. When Macbeth does eventually mouth it, nihilism comes over more as a sad outcome than as a philosophy (think, in contrast, of the sharp intellectual nihilism of the type endorsed by Turgenev’s Bazarov). Nihilism is less of a brilliant cynicism and more of a disability connected with anxieties of loss of control that together form patterns of circumvention.

Postponement and extemporal self-placing do not, however, exhaust Macbeth’s nihilism. Shakespeare connects these patterns of deferring to a pervasive hidden longing: the hope—perhaps always a silenced part of nihilism—that somewhere out there, value may still be found (Macbeth’s vague “success”). He says that if success is assured, he should act. But the clever expository scenes, in portraying Macbeth not simply as a successful warrior and captain, but as outstandingly successful, prevent a nonproblematic approach on our part to this reference to “success.” While Macbeth does mention losing the “golden opinions” others have of him, we get no sense of accomplishment, of an occupation with present success. Moreover, Shakespeare later gives Lady Macbeth lines—“our desire is got without content” (3.1.6)—that point precisely to the emptiness (both in terms of lack of content and lack of contentment) of what she and her husband had actually achieved by attaining royalty. The fact that we miss any reference on his part to his present success makes his chasing a
new success problematic. Success is experienced solely in terms of external praise, which, in turn, is experienced as something that may be discarded.

All this links success to a sense of emptiness, a frightening void that opens up when one is suddenly aware of the limitations of accomplishment. The psychological pattern itself—which Freud, in a discussion that includes Macbeth as one of its examples, termed being “wrecked by success”—is reiterated in both Lady Macbeth and Malcolm,^{10} the former in her collapse after gaining the power she was long after and the latter in the mode of self-abuse he practices when he senses that his wish to become king might well be fulfilled (4.3.46-102). However, regarding Macbeth's nihilism, it is less the psychic mechanism and more the way by which it is confronted that is stressed in the play. Macbeth never contemplates the hollow way in which he responds to his outstanding military achievement. He does what he knows only too well how to do: move on.

LIMITS

The paradox of fate that underlies the play and sets in motion the dramatic irony is that if the witches' prophecies are to be suspected, if they can be false, Macbeth should not act on or against them since they are unreliable. If they are, on the other hand, true, he cannot act on or against them since they would come about whatever he does. Either way he has a very good reason not to use the prophecies as motivations for action. Moreover, the more the play progresses, the more he discovers that what the opening prophecies predict is fulfilled to the dot. This makes his attempt to subvert fate by murdering Banquo and later deciding to kill Macduff, border on the irrational. What is interesting here is, I think, not so much the way in which the pattern coheres with or differs from other tragedies of fate that involve an attempt to avoid the unavoidable. It is, rather, the fact that he (and his wife) immediately dismiss this, I shall call it “fatalistic,” reasoning (it surfaces in 1.3.144, never to appear again). None of the murders he plans or commits are impulsive; they are, rather, planned and, regarding at least Duncan and Banquo, result from long deliberation. All of them involve emotional and moral costs as well as political and personal risks. In light of this, Macbeth's avoiding of fatalistic reasoning as a thought that should at the very least be raised becomes an inexplicable peculiarity.

So we have a nihilism that does not collapse into fatalism. Macbeth incorporates a view in which all is meaningless with an unhappy vitality. On its own, this sets a pragmatic contradiction between the abstract and the practical (if all is meaningless there is no reason to act; if one acts all is not meaningless). However, since Macbeth does act, the practical wins in this balance. The extemporality of the theoretical nihilist gives way to the seriousness of action. The centrality of action is also inherently a focus on its vehicle: the body (especially hands, the organs which, perhaps more than any other, associatively link the body to action). Macbeth's preoccupation with the somatic and particularly with blood, turns the body into a significant presence and reality that, according to the assumptions of his hazy world, cannot exist as an entity that truly has value. Hamlet or Richard III are also concerned with embodiment (Hamlet with the possibility of escaping it and Richard with the desire to be seen). However, in Macbeth these tensions remain raw, hesitant, indecisive, perhaps because he lacks Hamlet's depths of reflectivity or Richard's unfailing convictions.

Unlike Hamlet—or, for that matter, Duncan and Malcolm, who both explicitly formulate an appearance-reality tension and, at least in Hamlet's case, attempt to transcend embodiment—Macbeth's relation to the corporeal is one of encountering it. In his world everyone and everything is merely a means to an end which, when reached, turns itself into just another means. In these, Macbeth's circumstances, seeing another, an actual encounter, takes place when the body is suddenly perceived. For a man who persistently avoids reality, this appearance of the actual superficially manifests itself through various relations of sight. His inability to go back and look at Duncan's body (“I am afraid to think what I have done; / Look on't again, I dare not”) is the simpler of these (2.2.50-51). However, his attempt to stare back at Banquo's ghost, trying to meet his victim's gaze, is the more moving moment. He initially structures his ability to look back at the ghost in terms of bravery. To his wife's angry “Are you a man?” he replies with “Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that / Which might appal the Devil” (3.4.57-59). Looking back at that which he irrevocably did, at that
which looks back at him as a result and not as the instrumental moment which he initially conceived it to be, makes the act of looking involve a struggle. Daring to look—perhaps because in this man bravery can be manifested only through its links with the militant—immediately turns to threatening the ghost. But after he tries to intimidate the ghost, he returns to the ocular:

Avaunt, and quit my sight, let the earth hide thee—
Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;
Thou hast no speculation in those eyes
Which thou dost glare with.

(3.4.93-96)

Such a wish for bodies to be hidden, to disappear from vision, echoes his earlier accusations regarding graves as not fulfilling their purpose since they “send those we bury back.”

For Macbeth, the stronger of these encounters occur when the body lets its inside liquid be seen. Everything seems to wear off except the blood of victims. Blood is central in Macbeth's very first description by the captain:

... but all's too weak,
For brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name—
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel
Which smoked with bloody execution,
Like Valour's minion carved out his passage
Till he faced the slave—
Which ne'er shook hands nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseamed him from the nave to th' chops,
And fixed his head upon our battlements.

(1.2.15-23)

The bloody sword, the carving, ripping Macdonald the rebel apart from his navel to his jaws, decapitating him, this gruesome image is the first description of Macbeth in the play. The fact that Shakespeare supplies the details of Macdonald's killing may, of course, appear nonproblematic in the context of a military report that has to realistically capture the language of a captain and the fact that a rebel deserves violent retribution. However, when we hear of another incident in which Macbeth kills:

How it did grieve Macbeth! Did he not straight
In pious rage the two delinquents tear,
That were the slaves of drink, and thralls of sleep?

(3.6.11-13)

we suspect that the details of these offstage killings also impart a subtle characterization of Macbeth. This suspicion is strengthened when the commending report Duncan passes on to Macbeth regarding the latter's bravery in the battle, interestingly talks of Macbeth as making “strange images of death” (1.3.96). Duncan's praise for Macbeth thereby retains an allusion to the peculiarity of the specific ways by which Macbeth kills. The violence to the body, tearing it apart, opening up its borders (note the alarming metaphor of unseaming), is a violation which, in light of the depth-structure of the work to follow, is more than adequate punishment to a rebel. Rather, if we can look beyond the violence we may note something altogether extra-military that the contexts of battle and retribution permit, which would be impossible in other domains. The play connects disrespect for limits with a form of nihilism that never finds value or realness. Searching for some kind of resistance is expressed by stressing the way through which Macbeth repeatedly annihilates somatic borders.
The centrality of blood is also why the two scenes in which Macbeth and his wife fail to wash the blood from their hands create such a moving impression:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No—this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.

(2.2.59-62)

Blood sticks to one's hands and would turn the ocean red before it would be cleaned. Lady Macbeth uses the same structural imagery. After asking, “will these hands ne'er be clean?” she says: “Here's the smell of the blood still—all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.” (5.1.41, 48-49). Both references employ the hyperbolic “all” and make use of a synecdochic transporting of the guilt to one's part, to one's hand. It is not so much the crime that cannot be erased, that too, but more specifically the connection the body maintains between the crime and its perpetrator. More than articulating guilt, the image expresses the sense of one's crime as being a nonconfinable contamination. Shakespeare thereby captures the overwhelming nature of guilt, not only the feeling of transparency, but the sense that one's crime cannot be stopped from flowing into the entire world for all to see. Beyond an image of guilt, the nonwashable blood means that unlike all that can be removed, cast away, devalued, or postponed, blood is where Macbeth meets reality. In his angry world, in which success has little or no impact, in which power is pointlessly pursued, blood is palpable.

Through the estrangement to their hands via these uses of synecdoche, the Macbeths manifest the way in which guilt involves alienation from one's body. Embodiment is not only what exhibits that which performed the crime, but that which continues to follow the perpetrator around. Guilt, like shame, emotions that inherently have to do with others and being perceived by them, involve resetting the relations between body and self. The body as an intersubjective point of reference becomes something that one looks at anew and attempts relating to again (“What hands are here?”). The body, or more accurately, what “the body” has done, changes one's identity from a brave general to an executioner (“these hangman's hands”).

I want now to sum up Macbeth's ambivalent relation to the body as unavoidable realness. Through the characterization of Macbeth, Shakespeare conveys a general insight into nihilism in which the nihilist's preoccupation with borders and limits is more than practical skepticism; it is also a search for reality, for realness that the nihilist hopes would constitute resistance. Unlike his wife who speaks of the dead as nothing but pictures (2.2.52-53), Macbeth, who relates to everything around him as signs, cannot accept his wife's semiotic relation to corpses. Avoiding one's moment, along with all the gains of not relating to what is now—the gain of ignoring the inescapable process of forming a history that cannot be relived, the gain of avoiding happiness and grasping its limitations, the gain of avoiding the complications involved in acknowledging that people, actions, things have value and thereby losing the clear-cut polarities that structure the military achievements from which the play and this character begins—is not limitless. It is bounded by death, or more specifically, the deaths that he causes. His inability to look at Duncan's body or his struggle to look back at Banquo's ghost, is where his fears—the most pervasive state of mind he manifests throughout—suddenly connect him with what is present here and now.

Let me return now to Macbeth's lines in the closing act from which we began. In this scene Shakespeare brings the psychophilosophical pattern I have been tracking to the tragic outcome such dynamics prescribe. A man who persistently avoids, who endlessly defers emotion, a sense of accomplishment, someone for whom moments are only instrumental and thereby devoid of value, finally makes his nihilism explicit through identifying life with a tale signifying nothing. But the dynamics this play captures and develops are not limited to the movement of making explicit an underlying depth-structure. The direction is not only one of greater articulation but also of acceleration. Both his loving his wife and his fears, the two things he does
consistently feel, finally disappear, and merge into the embracing nothingness of everything else. “I have almost forgot the taste of fears,” he says (5.5.9-15).

Moments later, when he gets word of his wife's death, he retorts with his “She should have died hereafter; / There would have been time for such a word” (5.5.18-19) Like everything else in his life, her death too is something he wishes to postpone. More significant is the reference to her death as a “word.” The import of this specific verbal choice can now be gathered by attending to the context. The line is embedded in an enveloping expression in which all are but signs that signify nothing. Given the hierarchy between being and representing that governs these lines, her death too becomes but a sign. Her death itself is postponed to the “hereafter” in which she should have died. But even “there,” in a future which shall never come, it is referred to as a “word” and thereby abstracted from the ontological event which it is to the semiotic device through which it is only supposed to be signaled. All dies. What now remains, as Macbeth's movement reaches its end, is absolute hollowness. In his own eyes he is naught but a faded old man who has lived “long enough,” a sapless “yellow leaf” (5.3.22-23).

ENCOUNTERING

And in the midst of all this circumvention, avoidance, and hollow action, Shakespeare situates one of his most moving scenes: the talk between Ross, Malcolm, and Macduff. More than an actual contribution to plot or means of informing, the length of the preliminary dialogue between Malcolm and Macduff, before Ross arrives to report to Macduff the death of his wife and children, makes possible a build-up of sympathy to Macduff's straightforwardness and simple decency. Shakespeare seems to have wanted nothing more complicated than this for Macbeth's victim. But more than opposing Macbeth's nihilism and Macduff's unsophisticated commitment, the strongest moments of the scene both capture the resistance to the desire to avoid emotion and convey something as to what emotion is.

Recall Ross' initial inability to tell Macduff of the murder of his wife and children:

MACDUFF:

How does my wife?

ROSS:

Why well.

MACDUFF:

And all my children?

ROSS:

Well too.

MACDUFF:

The tyrant has not battered at their peace?

ROSS:

No, they were well at peace when I did leave 'em.

MACDUFF:
Be not a niggard of your speech: how goes't?

(4.3.176-80)

Some things are impossible to say.¹³ Beyond capturing Ross' difficulties, the fact that the latter does express through the double meaning of his last line the information he needs to communicate, turns ambiguity into a means of bypassing the literal. But Macduff senses the evasiveness and—notice the present tense—asks for literal nonequivocal informing. Which he gets:

MACDUFF:

If it be mine
Keep it not from me, quickly let me have it.
ROSS:
Let not your ears despise my tongue forever,
Which shall possess them with the heaviest sound
That ever yet they heard.
MACDUFF:

H'm—I guess at it.
ROSS:
Your castle is surprised; your wife, and babes,
Savagely slaughtered—to relate the manner
Were on the quarry of these murdered deer
To add the death of you.
MALCOLM:

Merciful Heaven—
What man, ne'er pull your hat upon your brows:
Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'erfraught heart, and bids it break.
MACDUFF:
My children too?
ROSS:
Wife, children, servants, all
That could be found.

MACDUFF:

And I must be from thence!

My wife killed too?

ROSS:

I have said.

MALCOLM:

Be comforted.

Let's make us med'cines of our great revenge,

To cure this deadly grief.

MACDUFF:

He has no children.

(4.3.199-215)

Macduff's repetitious questions force Ross to mouth and mouth again the literal language he is made to use. Ross moves to avoiding directness through referring to what he has already said: (“My wife killed too?” / “I have said”). But it is Macduff's focus on grief and his rejection of too quickly endorsing future-oriented emotions such as anger and the “medicine” of some “great revenge” that impart the deeper contrast between what these moments stand for, and Macbeth's postponements. We first notice the way in which Macduff tacitly accepts Ross' suggestion not to relate the manner of the murders. Malcolm, in his haste to convert grief into revenge would not, if put into Macduff's place, spare himself the details. Macduff, in contrast, concentrates on loss and attachment and rejects Malcolm's attempts to exchange present grief for future revenge. Malcolm has no children and therefore cannot understand.14

After the pauses and questions comes feeling, itself structured through rhetorical questions:

MACDUFF:

He has no children. All my pretty ones?

Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?

What, all my pretty chickens and their dam

At one fell swoop?

MALCOLM:

Dispute it like a man.

MACDUFF:

I shall do so:
But I must also feel it as a man;
I cannot but remember such things were
That were most precious to me; did Heaven look on,
And would not take their part?

(4.3.215-24)

On one level, we note the opposition between feeling and its avoidance expressed by Malcolm's militant remarks that in these lines border on scolding. However, these lines are also about something much less obvious, about what feeling might mean. It is here that the sort of neoromantic opposition between emotion and avoidance I have so far employed in this reading gains deeper dimensions. For, one may well ask, what is the type of oneness with the present I am opposing to a pervasive circumvention? And it is in Macduff's collapse to effeminate language, his “all my pretty chickens,” that provide us with one answer.

Indeed, the feminine ring of Macduff's metaphor does not escape Malcolm. This much is evident in his reproving: “Dispute it like a man” and in the mode of self-collecting that Macduff engages in the lines further on when he refrains from playing the woman with his eyes (along with Malcolm's approving “This time goes manly”). The fact that grief and feeling are identified with femininity would seem conventional enough. However, this is, at least in two ways, much less than what these lines are about. To begin with, Macduff, in his “I must also feel it as a man” reply to Malcolm, connects the feminine figure with feeling as a man. He is not a woman. Rather, he feels, and does so as a man. This attempt to encompass feminine contents within a stable masculinity—or, more radically, to redefine manliness through potentially subversive contents—ends when the options of crying and talk—much more directly associated with effeminacy—surface and are precluded as such:

I could play the woman with mine eyes,
And braggart with my tongue. But gentle heavens,
Cut short all intermission: front to front
Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself.(15)

(4.3.230-33)

Emotion, and this is what I take to be the second, deeper meaning of these lines, is identified with a destabilizing of a determining formative category. Manhood shakes, is in danger of breaking down, needs to be constituted anew. It is not, moreover, a matter of changes that are made merely regarding the gender associated expression of emotion. Rather, Macduff's “feel it as a man” points to the ontological level; a weakening of identity categories is identified with the feeling itself. An unsettling of formative categories is what intensive feeling involves, is part of what such feeling is. And the Macduff scene allows us to be even more specific. The destabilizing of identity works through permitting an antagonistic voice to sound through one's own mouth. In some moments of intensive feeling, something altogether oppositional to one's sense of self becomes momentarily encompassed within, and projected as, what one is.¹⁶

PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE

In Macbeth Shakespeare patiently depicts a complete movement of nihilism. He does not restrict nihilism to a “position” or a “thesis,” but pictures it as existential hollowness, as a reaction to life that persistently bypasses the possibilities for meaning. The fact that nihilism comes over as unhappy, does not of course count as a “refutation” of it. Things are more complicated than confirming or refuting.¹⁷
Like all works of art, literary texts are invitations to a specific structuralization of experience. One aspect of such a structuralization is the way it accommodates in different ways the phenomenology of witnessing so central to the act of reading. Witnessing—when it is shaped by subtle forces of the literary text—cannot be thought of as withdrawn passivity. It is, rather, a position that accommodates moments of identification and involvement as well as moments of reinvestment and detachment. As literary witnesses, we project voices onto the scene and prevent such projections according to conscious choices, to subjective limitations of responsiveness, to what the text in fact invites. Witnessing is an active position in which activity takes the form of involvement, of saying yes and no to possibilities texts open up. An interpretation is, accordingly, the process of consciously following up such affirmations and negations and signing them as choices.

The phenomenology of aesthetic response many times takes this general shape. A case can be now made for one sort of nonreducible gain that engaging with art, with this work of art, produces for philosophy. Beginning with the opposition of telling and showing, literature in general and plays (in virtue of their iconic nature) in particular communicate through the latter whereas philosophy is mostly limited to the former. Moving on to the opposition between describing and conveying, philosophy can describe experience, while witnessing is the primal state in which experiences are conveyed. Before trying to give such too-broad oppositions particular content, we need to ask whether such differences are advantages. In one sense, an answer depends on the relative “strengths” (or “depth” to employ a different metaphor) that one is willing to ascribe to each mode of communication. But an answer need not be limited to appealing to actual subjective experiences with philosophical belief formation—though this is, no doubt, decisively important—but may also operate through agreeing with Plato, Nietzsche, and other philosophers who have connected unique modes of philosophical communication with conceptions regarding human understanding.

But the previous reading of Macbeth allows for a stronger case that should be made on behalf of literature. Since nihilism challenges a first-truth there are no “strong” demonstrative arguments that are more appropriate to the case at hand. What is needed is to establish some acknowledgement that things are valuable. Such recognition cannot be grounded on reasoned argument without first presupposing the value of rational thought, an assumption that a nihilist would not grant. Indeed, for anyone who thinks that some first-truths are better than others, what is required, and rationally so, is a theory of rational, nonvalid argumentation, a rhetoric, which should be able to support a first-truth without pretending to constitute a proof. We are now in a position to see what such rhetoric might mean.

My reading sought to trace the powerful contrast Shakespeare draws between avoiding one's time and meeting it. Through Macbeth, Shakespeare captures an intellectual nihilism that is only a symptom of a psychological and existential depth-structure. Through Macduff, he embodies an opposite capacity for allowing the present to speak. The length of the Macduff scene—longer than any other scene in the play and twice as long as virtually all of them—suggests that whatever peek this scene includes requires a substantial build-up. Focusing on the peculiarities of Macbeth’s nihilism should explain why such build-up is necessary. Duration is required in order to develop something altogether alien to the cold, dark, and bloody atmosphere the work transmits. This contrast is activated both between the heart of this scene and the rest of the play in setting the differences between Macbeth and Macduff, and internal to the scene in opposing between Macduff and Malcolm.

Macbeth meets philosophy through this contrast. Embedded within an overall nihilistic context, a setting in which all is instrumentalized and deferred, within a gory, selfish, indeed hellish universe, is a moment that makes reading stop. Nothing less than feminizing a general is needed in order for us to catch the different voice. Only then do we perceive the alternative metaphysics of time and commitment to value that makes this confrontation a moment in which, long before they fight, Macbeth and Macduff oppose each other through the philosophies they embody. The battle is not between some sentimental romantic and a calculated technocrat but rather—and this is what creates the force—between two hardened generals only one of whom allows attachment to have its space. The very disproportion between the unending textual time allowed for nihilism
and the short but sharp moment in which it is contrasted creates the absorbing way through which a life that
acknowledges value comes across.

As far as “philosophical interests” are concerned, the literary technique of contrast means that one position is
presented as persistent background for another. The text does not “argue” for non-nihilism but allows this
first-truth to momentarily appear in an opposing context. It is now up to us to decide between the options
Macbeth and Macduff exemplify. The suggestive forces of the play do not aim at an impartial choosing on our
part but are obviously hierarchical. In stressing the vacuous nature of Macbeth's world, his unhappiness, his
essential dissatisfaction and the darkness of his universe, in opposing all this to the carefully structured
Macduff scene in which emotion is not only established but also highlighted as a moving moment of oneness
with what is real in one's time, the rhetoric of the text creates a reader position that responds to non-nihilism
when it appears and closes itself more and more to Macbeth's nihilism as the play progresses. Literary contrast
of this sort is “rhetorical” in the Aristotelian sense of rational, nondeductive argumentation since, while
contrast can turn some alternatives into plausible choices (in our case, choosing to invest one's world with
value), such reaction by no means necessarily follows from it. Employing means of this sort in the context of
philosophy is rational because when first-truths are concerned, no stronger means are available. Moreover,
unlike nonliterary rhetorical argument, we can perceive how encapsulating the move within an aesthetic
context enables readers to allow themselves to be influenced and infiltrated when rigorous proofs cannot be
given.21

Finally, apart from appealing to subjective experience with different modes of knowing, apart from arguing
for an epistemology in which some of these modes are set above others, and apart from stressing literature's
ability to function as rhetorical argument embedded within a suggestive context which, in the case of first
truths, one has rational reason to respond to, an additional argument on behalf of literature should be made.
This last thesis is that investigating patterns of belief formation is a necessary part of an inquiry into the
concept of knowledge itself. What we take to know, what we think we are justified in believing, is not limited
to beliefs gained through argument, but also includes beliefs that emerge from experience. Such experiential
knowing should accordingly be investigated as part of any comprehensive theory of knowledge. Moreover,
since some of these beliefs are philosophical ones, by studying their formation, philosophers do not simply
enlarge their ideas about belief formation, but about belief formation in philosophy. Regarding belief
formation through aesthetic experience, this means breaking up such experiential patterns into elements such
as showing, conveying, witnessing, identifying, projecting, responding, and other constituents of aesthetic
phenomenology. These still too-general categories need then to be further analyzed into specific and detailed
cases. As for philosophy's need of literature, this last thesis is demonstrative in two ways. First, since belief
formation through aesthetic response is distinct from other types of belief formation, studying it is necessary
for philosophy when the discipline is envisioned as including an inquiry into knowledge. Second, showing
that such experiences exist enables the beliefs that emerge regarding processes of belief formation and,
ultimately, regarding the concept of knowledge itself, to be justified via appeal to such evidence. What
matters, in this further respect, is not the truth of the beliefs I formed in my reading regarding nihilism, but the
simple fact that I formed them. The claim that philosophical beliefs do, at least sometimes, get formed that
way is justified through simply pointing out a case—a reading—in which such formation took place.

But is the specific response pattern created through the experience I described the only possible one in the
context of Shakespeare's play? While at least one other commentator has responded to Macbeth in a similar
way,22 the obvious answer is negative. The importance of this interpretive freedom should not, however, be
over stressed. A literary work, I said, is a collection of possibilities for structuring one's experience. A fruitful
interpretation should be both a discovery of one such possibility, and an invitation to engage it. Such a view
enables circumventing the question of subjective response. According to my interpretation, itself only an
invitation, Macbeth invites us to undergo a certain experience. The reader need not worry that I am
generalizing from my own subjective experience (though that is no disaster when response patterns are
discussed). Arthur Kirsch's interpretation (amongst other things a “documented” response) admits of the same
experience. Such “data”—to employ a rhetoric some may prefer—is all that the last demonstrative thesis requires since it serves as “empirical evidence” that a certain process of belief formation repeatedly results from attentively reading this play.

It is now possible to connect all this to the recent Nussbaum-Booth-Posner debate regarding literature and moral philosophy. Focusing attention on epistemological processes rather than on ethical ones enables explaining the force that ethical criticism of the type produced by Nussbaum has without endorsing the instrumental view of literature which Posner has stressed in his critique of her approach. If my claims above are correct, we need not choose between what Novitz has called “a shamelessly didactic view of literature” on the one hand and an “Art for art’s sake” approach that makes ethical features irrelevant on the other. Instead, we can identify reading literature with an aesthetic experience and regard that experience itself both as a proper subject matter for epistemological inquiry and as what contributes to unique, “deep,” moral belief formation. Thus, investigating salient features of aesthetic response becomes an inquiry into the epistemic conditions that can accommodate greater responsiveness to moral insight. When the moral claim itself is a first truth, such a shift in our responsive capacities can become a process we would rationally choose to undergo as a result of the impotence of conventional, argumentative philosophy.

Nihilism questions the very root of moral belief, the idea that some things have value at all. Philosophy can only answer this challenge through presupposing the value that rational inquiry is supposed to have. This means that nihilism makes us confront a philosophical limitation. Meeting nihilism cannot, therefore, be confined to argument. Through contrast, aesthetic experience allows a preference for value to be formed. Formation is not conclusive justification. Nevertheless, it is something that can be done. Nihilism can be met, as this play meets it, through creating an experience in which value can be perceived. Moving from this point on to preferring value is a matter of succumbing to the text's rhetoric, of letting it resonate for a while.

Deciding to listen is, of course, never necessary. It is a decision, a choice. Nothing stronger but nothing weaker.

Notes

1. See, in the following order, 4.3.13; 1.2.24; 1.2.16; 1.2.54; 1.7.33. All references to Macbeth are to Nicholas Brooke, The Tragedy of Macbeth (Oxford, 1990).


3. For a suggestion according to which Macbeth's unhappiness results from his murdering the pleasure principle, see William Kerrigan's “Macbeth and the History of Ambition,” in John O'Neill's Freud and the Passions (University Park, Penn., 1996), pp. 13-24. Macbeth's pervasive unhappiness is one factor that should count against some suggestions regarding his underlying motivations. Kristian Smidt claims that his ambition stems from a desire for external praise, for “pomp and ceremony” (“Two Aspects of Ambition in Elizabethan Tragedy: Doctor Faustus and Macbeth,” English Studies, 50 (1969), 235-48). Donald W. Foster's “Macbeth's War on Time” suggests that Macbeth wishes to create himself and not resign to gains got through chance and time (English Literary Renaissance, 16 (1986), 319-42). Apart from being poorly supported by the text, the last two suggestions as to Macbeth's motivations cannot explain why Macbeth remains unsatisfied after he achieves what they suppose he is after.


5. I am thinking of the Nussbaum-Booth-Posner debate in Philosophy and Literature, 22.2 (1998) though the idea that literature's contribution is in focusing on the particular and thereby enhancing

6. Regarding a different Shakespearean variation on the idea of losing value, see L. C. Knight's comparison of Macbeth's nihilism with *The Rape of Lucrece* (2.148-54) in *Some Shakespearean Themes* (Stanford, 1959), pp. 137-38.

7. The centrality of time and Macbeth's relation to it has been repeatedly investigated. Luisa Guj's “Macbeth and the Seeds of Time” (*Shakespeare Studies*, 18 [1986], 175-88) counts forty-five uses of the word in the play. Foster, in “Macbeth's War on Time,” sums up much previous discussion of the idea that time serves as redeemer and contrasts it with his own view that Macbeth's conflict is with time and its limitations as such. Guj, too, explores this theme in stressing Macbeth's attempt to obliterate the past and stop the future. I shall concentrate on a different aspect of the relationship.

8. See, for example, the striking way in which she misreads him in 3.2.5-28. She believes that he is worried about his immorality, where he is in fact concerned with his fears of Banquo.

9. The tradition of regarding Macbeth as a noble, weak man tempted into evil by his wife, exemplified by readers such as Hazlitt and Johnson, or seeing him as deeply conscience-ridden, as does Bradley, disregards the way in which the two characters differ in the ways they later relate to what they did. Such a reading also confuses—regarding Macbeth's supposed temptation by his wife—being persuaded with allowing oneself to be persuaded. Against such readings, Richard Moulton (in *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* [New York, 1966], pp. 144-67) makes a persuasive case for Macbeth's moral shallowness, but in the strict division that he sets between Macbeth as externality and his wife as associated with the internal, his reading is in danger of simplifying both. What has not been stressed enough about the so-called temptation scene are Macbeth's short but semantically pregnant lines before his wife "tempts" him. To her question regarding Duncan's planned departure from their home he replies: “Tomorrow, as he purposes” (1.5.59).

10. Sigmund Freud, “Those Wrecked by Success,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London, 1957), vol. 14, pp. 316-32. Interestingly enough, Freud discusses only Lady Macbeth as exemplifying the pattern and does not seem to notice the way in which Malcolm and Macbeth are variants of the same psychic type. Rossiter also perceives the links between success and emptiness in Macbeth, but unlike the suggestion I am pursuing, connects them to his own exemplification of the tradition of depersonalizing the characters and seeing them as part of one psychic entity.

11. For one analysis of the centrality of blood imagery in the play, see G. Wilson Knight's two essays on the play in his *The Wheel of Fire* (London, 1950).

12. G. Wilson Knight greatly exaggerates in thinking that Macduff was evil, or at least cruel, because he left his wife and children behind (*Wheel of Fire*, p. 151). In fact, Macduff has no reason to think that his wife and children are in danger (even if he is) and in that, shows that his fault is not moral, but of a more cognitive nature: it is that he underestimates the lengths to which Macbeth's disproportionate cruelty has gone. For a similar conclusion, see Arthur Kirsch's "Macbeth's Suicide," *ELH*, 51 (1984), 269-96 and Smidt's “Two Aspects of Ambition.”

13. Compare Macbeth's inability to say “Amen” after he kills Duncan.

14. I am here following Brooke's reading of “he” in line 216 as referring primarily to Malcolm and not to Macbeth (see the Oxford edition, p. 192). There is a subtle development in Malcolm's character in the closing lines of the play. Shakespeare embeds a small episode in which Seyward receives news of his son's death. His startling cold response, in approval of the brave way his son died, creates a mirror-scene to the one discussed here, but note Malcolm's change in relating to the value of emotions.
unconnected to actions: “He's worth more sorrow, / And that I'll spend for him” (5.7.80-81).

15. The literature on the uses of gender in this play is by now huge. For one discussion and many references see Janet Adelman's *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest* (London, 1992), pp. 130-46. However, the reader may easily see that while what follows refers to sexual identity, the point I am aiming at has little to do with questions of gender.

16. This is a pattern the play repeats. Lady Macbeth's reference to “unsexing” and her alarming antimaternal rhetoric regarding what she would do to a baby that she loves in the lines I have previously cited, iterates the same identification of emotion—this time a mix of ambition, coveting, determination—as a disruption of layers of identity expressed through voicing an alien rhetoric. Or, more obviously, note the way she picks out instances of unmanliness in Macbeth when he is afraid (1.7.41-51, 3.4.57, 3.4.74), thereby setting the conventional identification of fear with a retreat from the masculine. These moments have, I believe, less to do with gender and more to do with connecting emotion (ambition, fear, grief (with a momentary reshuffling of identity). They are, moreover, moments that are not instances of avoidance but of intensive confrontation with what is real in one's time.

17. A more sophisticated version of an approach according to which a literary text may refute nihilism and thereby establish a first-truth, has been suggested by Jesse Kalin (“Philosophy Needs Literature: John Barth and Moral Nihilism,” *Philosophy and Literature*, 1 [1976], 171-82). Kalin proposes that not fiction, but the reader experience, when it is conceived as a recreation of the experience of characters, may function as a counterexample. If a philosophical thesis such as nihilism claims that nothing has value, experiences in which one feels that certain things are meaningful contradict the thesis. For all its elegance, Kalin's paper deals only with a “descriptive” nihilism and is oblivious to the much more plausible “normative” nihilism. That is, if a nihilist says that experiences of value do not exist, Kalin is right. However, the thesis is usually that such experiences exist but are irrational. No experience readers undergo would contradict a normative nihilism of this sort.

18. Though showing need not be iconic and can be a verbal recreation of something that, unlike philosophical telling, in principle can be seen. The telling/showing opposition along with the preference of the latter is explicit in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*: “To see sad sights moves more than hear them told, / For then the eye interprets to the ear / The heavy motion that it doth behold …” (1324-26). John Roe (in The New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of *The Poems* [Cambridge, 1992], p. 206) relates these lines to Sidney and follows Malone in tracing the tradition of preferring the visual to Horace's *Art of Poetry*.


20. For connections between style and implicit epistemology in Plato, see my “The Face Of Truth,” *Metaphilosophy*, 30 (1999), 79-94; for such connections in Nietzsche, see my “Seeing Truths,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 15 (1998), 80-87. The same connections between epistemological and rhetorical concerns also animates therapeutic visions of philosophy. I am thinking of the way in which arguments are subordinated to ethical therapeutic goals in Hellenistic thought as shown in Nussbaum's *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, 1994). The medical analogy, so central to Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics, implies that, just like a doctor in relation to a patient's body, the philosopher must always note the makeup of the recipient's mind.

21. I make an analogous case regarding contingent claims in my forthcoming “Mature Love: A Reading of *Antony and Cleopatra*."

22. See the closing paragraphs of Kirsch's "Macbeth's Suicide."
Criticism: Themes: Rebecca Lemon (essay date March 2002)


[In the following essay, Lemon discusses the historicism of didactic “scaffold speeches” made by condemned traitors and examines examples of this kind of rhetoric in the language of various characters in Macbeth.]

Treason plagues Macbeth from its opening: by the second scene of the play, the first Thane of Cawdor has betrayed King Duncan, and, by the fourth scene, Malcolm confirms Cawdor's execution for treason. Reporting on the event, Malcolm declares of Cawdor that “very frankly he confess'd his treasons, / Implor'd your Highness' pardon, and set forth / A deep repentance” (1.4.5-7). These lines reveal the dying last words of a traitor, familiar to its Jacobean audience as a monologue spoken from the scaffold by hundreds of prisoners. Such speeches were characterized by a confession of guilt and a prayer to the monarch as illustrated by Cawdor's own words. Recorded in chapbooks, ballads, and state papers, the “scaffold speech” was delivered by prisoners prior to execution, serving as a critical site for the apparent affirmation of the monarch and a re-establishment of communal, public order, as notably argued by Michel Foucault for early modern France, and J. A. Sharpe and Lacey Baldwin Smith for England. These speeches were meant to serve a didactic purpose. First, the spectacle of the prisoner on the scaffold itself instructed the audience to avoid such crime and its gruesome punishment. Second, the prisoner's speech often directly admonished the audience not to engage in criminal activity. Cawdor's scaffold speech within Macbeth thus serves as a warning within a warning, given that English Renaissance theories of tragedy, offered by writers such as George Puttenham and Sir Philip Sidney, stress the didactic effect of tragedy in cautioning its audience members against crime and tyranny. In his Defense of Poetry (c. 1581), for example, Sidney offers a theory of tragedy that, although based primarily on the classical model of Seneca and the contemporary model of Gorbuduc (1562), nevertheless both influences and anticipates the tragic playwriting of the next decades. He defines “high and excellent tragedy, that openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue; that maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humors.” Sidney's theory posits tragedy as the exposure of “wounds” and “ulcers,” suggesting that the genre reveals faults in characters in order, in turn, to reveal or prevent such faults in the audience. While the well-known Aristotelian model of tragedy both provokes emotion in the audience and then purges this emotion through catharsis, Sidney's model of tragedy either teaches its audience to avoid vice or exposes those guilty viewers: like Hamlet's mousetrap play, tragedy causes abusive kings to “manifest their tyrannical humors.”

On one level, Macbeth appears to confirm this exemplary model of tragedy, and indeed the early representation of Cawdor's scaffold speech could be read as a foreshadowing of the events of the play: a hero turns traitor and in dying teaches the audience to avoid his own treachery. Certainly the legend of the play's first performance would support this reading, as critics have long noted. On August 7, 1606, Macbeth was allegedly performed before Queen Anne and her visiting brother, King Christian of Denmark, in order to celebrate King James's triumph over the Gunpowder plot traitors. Although the play's role in the royal celebrations that followed the plot's discovery may be merely apocryphal, Macbeth's Porter directly refers to one of the plotters, Father Henry Garnet, suggesting that Shakespeare's portrait of treason emerged in part from the contemporary event. As Henry Paul argues in his groundbreaking study The Royal Play of Macbeth, the play celebrates James's exposure of the plot, serving as a contemporary compliment to the king and educating audiences in the ideology of legitimate sovereignty. Leonard Tennenhouse also astutely analyzes Macbeth as a panegyric celebrating sovereign power, suggesting that Shakespeare “mystifies the notion of kingship, reinvigorates the signs and symbols associated with the exercise of legitimate power, and makes the
theatre speak a more conservative ideology."\textsuperscript{9}

The spectacle of Macbeth's severed head at the end of the play should serve precisely this didactic purpose, as Marjorie Garber reminds us, since the head will be displayed "[p]ainted upon a pole, and underwrit, / 'Here may you see the tyrant'" (5.8.26-27).\textsuperscript{10} She notes how Macbeth "is to become an object lesson, a spectacle, a warning against tyranny." Nevertheless, as Garber herself goes on to argue, his success as an object lesson is complicated by his uncanny role as a type of male Medusa: he is both familiar and monstrous, both male and female.\textsuperscript{11} This notion of Macbeth as a figure of inversion and contamination returns us to Sidney's definition of tragedy as a genre that "showeth forth the ulcers." Although he most obviously characterizes the drama as an exemplum, Sidney also suggests how tragedy is a genre that turns things inside out: what should be inside the body spills out for external, public view in the form of an ulcer or wound. Specifically, tragedy externalizes inward, transgressive desires for all to see, and this simple mechanism of exposure produces complex results in terms of audience reaction and interpretive possibility. As Steven Mullaney's insightful analysis of the liminal place of the Elizabethan stage demonstrates, the "place of the stage," both geographically, in the liberties of London, and historically, as a newly established site, allows the theatre to examine critically the culture of which it was marginally a part.\textsuperscript{12}

This essay focuses on \textit{Macbeth}'s oppositional potential by analyzing Cawdor's execution in the opening scenes as a failure of didacticism, both on the state and theatre scaffolds: the exemplary traitor's speech does not instruct Macbeth to avoid treason but potentially offers him a model, a namesake even, for his own criminal desires.\textsuperscript{13} Even before Macbeth's treason, then, Duncan's Scotland reveals, following Jonathan Goldberg's powerful analysis, that "hegemonic control is an impossible dream, a self-defeating fantasy."\textsuperscript{14} Not only does Cawdor's execution fail as an educational, hegemonic spectacle, but also, more importantly, the staging of this familiar genre of confession before death complicates the articulation of truth in the play. As a result, the play blends allegedly legitimate sovereignty with treasonous deception, ultimately producing a ruler in Malcolm who combines rather than opposes the knowledge of traitors and monarchs. Wilbur Sanders and, more recently, David Scott Kastan rightly note that Malcolm is a man of "smaller stature" and "reductive vision" in comparison to his father Duncan.\textsuperscript{15} He nevertheless represents, I will argue, a model of kingship produced out of Scotland's own fair and foul landscape: Malcolm adopts the villainous characteristics of Macbeth's own reign, employing the deceptive mechanisms typical of traitors in order to rule his kingdom effectively. Despite the deeply illuminating arguments of Janet Adelman and Peter Stallybrass, then, that the promised efficacy of Malcolm's rule emerges out of his association with the reactionary, patriarchal politics of "consolidating male power,"\textsuperscript{16} I instead propose that the future king's compromised methods attest to the radical, lingering effects of treason even beyond the errant Macbeth's death. Malcolm, as Alan Sinfield persuasively argues, "indicates the circumspection that will prove useful to the lawful good king, as much as to the tyrant."\textsuperscript{17} Like Macbeth himself, the future king practices the traitor's arts of deception.

Rather than fulfilling Sidney's definition of exemplary tragedy, which should teach kings to fear tyranny, then, \textit{Macbeth} provocatively illuminates Sidney's view of tragedy as a genre that "showeth forth the ulcers."\textsuperscript{18} This contamination of the office of king by the traitor in the course of \textit{Macbeth} exhibits the seepage between opposites in a manner that recalls Sidney's definition. Just as the internal ulcer exposes itself to light, so does the traitor infect the monarchy to the point where the hidden villainy becomes part of the public life of the state. By exhibiting hidden wounds to the public view, by penetrating the boundaries between internal and external, tragic theatre stages an epistemologically and politically unsettling spectacle of infectious boundarylessness that, in the case of \textit{Macbeth}, leaves the audience convinced less of the crown's authority than of the dramatic power of the hero's own original script, a script which defies the scaffold that represents him.

To explore the tragic, political complexity of the scaffold as staged in \textit{Macbeth}, this essay will first discuss the characteristics of historical scaffold speeches in order to elucidate their interpretive complexity. Turning to the episode of Cawdor's execution, I then argue that the duplicitous language at stake in the historical scaffold
speech typifies the speech of traitors as represented in *Macbeth*, first in Cawdor's scaffold speech and subsequently in the witches' prophecies. This duplicitous, treasonous language of Macbeth and the witches reappears, I argue, in the mouth of Malcolm, the son of Duncan and legitimate king of Scotland. Examining the representation of Malcolm reveals the interconnection of treason and monarchy: rather than purging Scotland of Macbeth's errant leadership, Malcolm instead adopts the hero's traitorous speech, demonstrating how the linguistic duplicity typical of traitors proves necessary in sustaining Scotland's monarchs as well.

**THE SCAFFOLD SPEECHES OF TRAITORS**

On June 2, 1572, the popular Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, was brought to the scaffold for his execution. Guilty of attempting to secure marriage to Mary, Queen of Scots, Norfolk was the first prisoner executed by Elizabeth I. He paid the executioner to help ensure a job well done and offered a repentance speech that twice had to be silenced by the sheriff. According to the account, the Duke proclaimed from a scaffold erected on Tower Hill,

> I do not excuse myself, but I come to discharge my conscience, and to acquit my peers, and not to complain of any injustice, for I have deserved this, and more a great deal, in that I have abused the queen majesty's mercy towards me; whom once again, with hands lifted up, I pray God long to preserve and reign over you.

Here, Norfolk promises to disclose before the audience his immaterial thoughts, to “discharge [his] conscience” in his scaffold speech. Exposing his conscience for the audience, his supposedly authentic revelation has the effect of validating the charge of treason for which he stands accused, as he says, “I have deserved this, and more a great deal,” acknowledging the justice of his punishment and absolving the Queen and peers from implication in the violent spectacle. With Elizabeth having abolished the Catholic method of confession in 1563 with the establishment of the Anglican church, the scaffold speech functions as a secular confessional, offering an opportunity for the sinner to “discharge [his] conscience” in order to be forgiven, a point argued by Steven Mullaney in his brief but illuminating analysis of scaffold speeches in relation to *Measure for Measure*: “scaffold confessions were culturally produced and determined manifestations of an effort to secularize and theatricalize confession, to enter it into the repertoire of available forms of ideological control” (*Place*, 112).

The rest of Norfolk's speech exhibits such ideological control as he moves from his opening acknowledgment of the merciful Queen through his own confession of wrongdoing, ending with his final prayer for the monarch: “I pray God long to preserve and reign over you.” The formula evident in his dying last words appears in hundreds of speeches from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, each characterized by a confession of wrongdoing, a validation of punishment, and a final prayer to the audience. This pattern, for example, appears in the cases of the traitors associated with the Babington plot, the Essex rebellion, and the Gunpowder plot, three of the most sensational instances of treason in early modern England. Affirming that they have been brought forward to die, prisoners such as Christopher Norton, Thomas Salisbury, and Robert Devereux, the second Earl of Essex, each then announced the justice of their punishments. Norton, executed in 1570, claimed that he was “justly condemned, by the laws of the realm.” He then claims, “I acknowledge and confess, my good Lord and Savior, before the Throne of thy majesty, my heinous offence.” Likewise, Salisbury, executed in 1586 for his role in the Babington plot, claimed, “I confess that I have deserved Death, and that I have offended her majesty, whom to forgive me I heartily beseech.” Finally, Essex too acknowledged his “just punishment” at his execution in 1601, offering a prayer to God: “I humbly beseech my Saviour Christ to be a mediator to the eternall Majestie for my pardon; especially for this my last sinne, this great, this bloudie, this crying, this infectious sinne.” Each of these prisoners begins with confession of guilt and ends with a plea to God, following the conventional rhetoric that ostensibly convinces the audience of the criminal's wrong-doing while warning them against committing treasonous acts.
The strict conventions of execution speech, as seen in the cases of Norfolk, Norton, Salisbury, and Essex served to validate the crown and control the audience, as historians J. A. Sharpe and Lacey Baldwin Smith have persuasively argued. Sharpe argues, for example, that these speeches were part of a theatre of punishment designed to articulate a set of values prescribed by the Stuart state: gallows speeches “were of obvious advantage to the state and the state church: they legitimized not only the punishment being suffered by the individual felon, but also the whole structure of secular and religious authority.” When, for example, the notorious Gunpowder plotter Henry Garnet appeared on the scaffold, he warned the audience against treason, telling his fellow Catholics, “I exhort them all to take heed they enter not into any Treasons, Rebellions, or Insurrections against the King.”

Since these speeches ostensibly justified the crown's punishment, not surprisingly they were used as propaganda supporting the crown. Printed with the monarch's permission, and often by his or her printer, traitors' speeches circulated in pamphlets that narrated events from the arraignment of the prisoner to his or her execution, reminding the audience not to sympathize with the traitor. The didactic power of the scaffold speech is put forth in Henry Goodcole's record of the execution of Francis Robinson in 1618. Goodcole's preface states that “dying men's words are ever remarkable, and their last deeds memorable for succeeding posterities, by them to be instructed, what virtues or vices they followed and imbraced, and by them to learne to imitate that which was good, and to eschew evill.” He defends his own practice of circulating scaffold speeches, insisting on his interest in education over sensation. He is confident that “succeeding posterities” will learn the proper lesson from these prisoners, rather than mistakenly following their corrupt example: they will “imitate that which was good, and to eschew evill.”

While the crown or author may have manufactured a prisoner's last words for the purposes of propaganda, a point to which I shall return later, a prisoner may well have uttered a formulaic speech due to a set of political, economic, and spiritual pressures exerted on him during his imprisonment. Rather than capitulating to the crown's version of events out of obedience, he or she may have instead uttered such formulaic words in order to save family members, an estate, or his or her soul. First, the prisoner's family stood to gain economically if he confessed his crime. According to the statute law, the sentence for treason included forfeiture of the prisoner's entire estate to the crown, which meant that the prisoner's wife and children were deprived of their land, house, and any of their belongings. Since a woman's estate went to her husband upon marriage, she would become destitute if her husband were sentenced with treason. The crown, however, occasionally returned the wife's jointure to the family. This possibility effectively forced the prisoner to comply with the crown's judgment in the hopes of securing the estate for his surviving family. Before his execution for treason, for example, Gunpowder plotter Ambrose Ruckwood offered the conventional formula of confession, apology, and prayer, and he ended his speech by “beseeching the King to bee good to his wife and children.” Likewise, Everard Digby also requested “that his wife might have her jointer, his children the lands intailed, by his father; his sisters their legacies in his hand unpaid.”

In addition to the economic pressure exerted on the prisoner, he would also experience spiritual pressure to deliver a conventional scaffold speech. Once in prison, he would receive visits from Anglican ministers intent on tending to the state of his soul. In a culture committed to the Christian belief in the afterlife, the confession of sins and expression of penitence were vital to gaining salvation after death. Shakespeare's Hamlet grieves that Claudius “took my father grossly, full of bread, / With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May” (3.3.80-81), and he acknowledges that if he killed Claudius at prayer, he would “this same villain send / To heaven” (77-78). Hamlet expresses the cultural belief that, in order to cleanse the soul of sins and ascend to heaven, a dying man must indicate penitence. Even if the prisoner did not share the Anglican belief in penitence and salvation, he had little to lose in expressing his contrition on the scaffold and rarely did a prisoner fail to offer a prayer.

Finally, such religious pressure helps account for the utter conventionality of these speeches, since the long tradition of the *ars moriendi* helped prisoners to shape their deaths according to a model of penitence. The
prayer reveals the prisoner’s contrition before God, and hence his potential for salvation (“that my soule may be lifted uppe by faith”), a formula that evokes the *ars moriendi*, found in such devotional texts as William Perkin's *Salve for a Sicke Man* (1595) and Christopher Sutton's *Disce Mori* (1600). Salvation comes as a result of penitence; as Thomas Becon writes in the popular text *The Sicke Manne's Salve* (1561), God will forgive any sinner: “we behold His tender mercy and loving kindnes toward penitent synners, and howe ready he is to forgeve, whansoever we tourne unto him.”\(^32\) The body of the dying criminal, despite its villainy, cannot prevent its penitent soul from reaching heaven, and this enables the prisoner to prompt his own spiritual ascension, making the scaffold a site of religious faith. As a stage on which both secular punishment and Christian promise are performed, the scaffold witnesses the prisoner physically destroyed by earthly authority while potentially ascending to heaven.

These political, economic, and spiritual pressures served in a large part to ensure that scaffold speeches conformed to the formula of confession, apology, and prayer. Yet, the utterly formulaic quality of such speeches could have raised doubts among the audience members as to their authenticity. Since the audience would be aware of the social pressures surrounding the prisoner on the scaffold, they might question the sincerity of the prisoner’s highly formulaic language, understanding his performance on the scaffold as a false repentance born of a sincere desire to protect his family. As condemned subjects endlessly performed the same role on the scaffold, the crowd’s faith in the authenticity of each confession may well have dwindled. Scaffold speeches are therefore problematic, not only because of their use as propaganda but also because the insincerity of the confession could be patently obvious to an audience. While the speeches may appear to reconstitute monarchical power, then, in the case of the scaffold genre a significant gap exists between the mouthing of the scaffold conventions and a full confirmation of the crown’s position.

Indeed, early modern pamphleteers occasionally voice suspicions about the authenticity of scaffold speeches. In “A True and Perfect Relation of the Whole Proceedings against the late most barbarous Traitors” (1606), for example, the author reports a phrase of Sir Edward Coke’s, made at the arraignment of the Gunpowder plotters: “true repentance is indeed never too late: but late repentance is seldome found true.”\(^33\) Coke’s pithy saying, which may have been a common expression, draws into question the sincerity of a prisoner’s eleventh hour confession and prayer on the scaffold. His doubt about the authenticity of scaffold repentances mirrors that of the author F. W., who condemns the prisoner Ambrose Ruckwood for insincerity in “The Araignement and Execution of the late Traytors,” a pamphlet circulated after the Gunpowder plot. The author claims that Ruckwood “out of a studied speech would faine have made his bringing uppe and breeding in idolatrie, to have been some excuse to his villanie, but a faire talke, could not helpe a fowle deed.”\(^34\) He condemns Ruckwood’s speech as “studied,” a term that suggests that the speech is a fictional expression akin to the memorized speech of an actor on stage. Such “faire talke” does not impress the author, who reminds his readers of Ruckwood’s “fowle deed.”

As well as questioning the sincerity of formulaic repentance, these pamphleteers may have occasionally fabricated a prisoner’s dying words. Given the propagandistic value of such pamphlets in justifying the crown’s case, the authors would themselves have experienced pressure to record speeches according to the conventional formula. In an account of the scaffold speech of Henry Cuffe, executed in March 1601 for his role in the Essex rebellion, for example, the author condemns the prisoner for refusing to repent, only to report his utterly conventional final words on the scaffold. Cuffe initially reiterates his innocence on the scaffold, claiming, “I do here call God, his angels, and my own conscience to witness, that I was not in the least concerned therein, but was shut up that whole day within the house, where I spent time in very melancholy reflections.” Despite Cuffe’s self-defense, however, the account, switching to third person, then records that he “began to apply himself to his devotions, which he managed with a great deal of furvour, and then making a solemn profession of his Creed, and asking pardon of God and the queen, he was dispatched by the executioner.”\(^35\) Similarly, in an account of the Gunpowder plot traitors, the author F. W. tells his readers that the prisoners “seemed to feele no part of feare, either of the wrath of God, the doome of Justice, or the shame of sinne; but as it were with seared Consciences, senceles of grace, lived, as not looking to die.”\(^36\)
prisoners “tooke Tabacco out of measure” and generally expressed little concern for their treason. When brought to court, they continued to be insolent, “craving mercy of neyther God nor the king for their offences” (sig. B3r-v). Yet F. W. reports that, on the scaffold, Edward Digby and Francis Bates asked forgiveness “of God, of the king, and the whole kingdom” (sig. C1r; C2r). The discrepancy between the prisoners's indifference or claims of innocence in jail and their subsequent repentance on the scaffold may have raised doubts in the reader's mind about the pamphlet's accuracy, since the author manages both to condemn the obstinacy of the men and to confirm their guilt through their own scaffold confessions.

The accounts of the Essex rebellion and the Gunpowder plot acknowledge the frequent opposition of sinful deeds and pious speech: as F. W. claims above, “faire talke could not help a fowle deed.” Explicitly demonstrating that a reported speech might be insincere, delivered by a prisoner concerned for his family's welfare, these pamphlets question the very formulaic, artful language that is the stock and trade of their own profession. These pamphleteers, then, implicitly suggest that their own reports, like the speeches themselves, might also be fabricated for propaganda purposes. If such speeches were meant to instruct the audience to avoid vice and to fear sovereign authority, the reports convey these formulaic, repentant dying words with the recognition that they are a convenient fiction. This sense of the scaffold speech as a fiction pushes on the vital work of Mullaney, who stresses the opposition of the state and theatre scaffolds. According to Mullaney, the last dying speech is “an exemplary manifestation of the power of the state to foster internalized obedience even among its most retrograde members,” while the “power of the stage was precisely the power of fiction” (112-13). Yet the scaffold speech, as I argue above, is itself a powerful fiction. Aware of audience skepticism, the pamphleteers nevertheless practiced their trade under the encouragement of an avid reader who may have been the only audience member willing to mistake the fiction for reality: the crown itself. Attempting to rely on the illusory sincerity of the speech to validate its punishment, the crown's scaffold instead produced a spectacle of physical violence and interpretive riddles, uncomfortably mingling “fowle” and “faire” in a manner that recalls the foggy heath of the witches in Shakespeare's Macbeth.

### INTERPRETING CAWDOR'S SCAFFOLD SPEECH

The witches' phrase in the first scene of Macbeth famously announces the play's interpretive ambiguity in terms that match F. W.'s condemnation of Ruckwood: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair: / Hover through the fog and filthy air” (1.1.11-12). The play's next scenes, alternating between Duncan's bloody battlefield and the witches' foggy heath, swiftly confirm this interpenetration of foul and fair by presenting two treasonous spectacles: the treachery of the Thane of Cawdor, which Rosse reports to Duncan in scene two, and the witches' seditious prophecies to Macbeth in scene three. In both cases, fair news accompanies foul deeds or desires: first, the triumph of Scotland against Norway comes with the announcement of the first Thane of Cawdor's treason; second, the promotion of Macbeth to Thane of Cawdor provokes the birth of his treasonous desire. As Macbeth asks himself on hearing the witches' prophecy, “why do I yield to that suggestion / Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair, / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs, / Against the use of nature?” (1.3.134-37).

The play powerfully establishes the parallelism between the heath and battlefield: in both sets of scenes, an onstage audience of two noblemen struggle to comprehend treasonous language. In one instance, Banquo and Macbeth hear the witches' prophecies, and in the other, Duncan and Malcolm respond to the report of Cawdor's treachery. While the witches' words provoke the birth of treason in Macbeth, however, Cawdor's scaffold speech presents the other end of the trajectory, reporting the voice of the condemned traitor. Having seen Macbeth lured by “instruments of darkness,” we now witness the first Cawdor denouncing his treasonous acts in a conventional, didactic speech. Malcolm announces Cawdor's death to his father,

With one that saw him die: who did report,  
That very frankly he confess'd his treasons,  
Implor'd your Highness' pardon, and set forth
A deep repentance. Nothing in his life
Became him like the leaving it: he died
As one that had been studied in his death
To throw away the dearest thing he ow'd
As 'twere a careless trifle.

[1.4. 3-11]

According to Malcolm's report, Cawdor's final words consist of his confession of treason, his plea to the monarch and his repentant prayer. The precise correspondence of Cawdor's lines with extant speeches of historical traitors and the wide circulation of the speeches in pamphlets strongly suggest that Shakespeare, a dramatist intimate with the art of public speech, relied on such material in depicting Cawdor's last moments. This episode with Cawdor has received limited critical attention, however, possibly because scholars concur on its dramatic function: it foreshadows Macbeth's later treason in granting him the traitor Cawdor's title, and it alerts the audience to the accuracy of at least part of the witches' prophecy in the following scene, where they hail Macbeth as the Thane of Cawdor. While these lines may not strike a modern audience as problematic, this scaffold speech presented Shakespeare's contemporary audience with a familiar, yet complex, genre. Karin S. Coddon has helped illuminate the scene's interpretive richness; she argues that Cawdor's reported lines "paint a typical enough tableau, but it is ironized both by its narrative prematurity and by the fact that the new Thane of Cawdor is already contemplating treason." Such formulaic repentance, she argues, should accompany tragic closure, rather than occurring in the play's first scene.

Indeed, Malcolm's report acknowledges the interpretive challenge of Cawdor's model repentance. Despite the "frankness" of Cawdor's speech, Malcolm expresses his reservation at the traitor's performance. Malcolm's first line, "[n]othing in his life became him like the leaving it," dances between disdain and compliment for the traitor. Although he wryly dismisses the traitor, suggesting that death suits the treacherous Cawdor more than life ever did, he equally implies that the traitor earned an unprecedented glory in his final moment, making it the greatest achievement in his life. Malcolm maintains this tenuous balance between praise and contempt for Cawdor in his next line: "he died / As one that had been studied in his death." Expressed through a simile, the line compares Cawdor's end to a stock death, "one that had been studied," suggesting that the traitor appropriately prepared himself according to the tradition of the ars moriendi. The phrase "studied in his death" equally implies, however, an artful, or dissembling end, one of mouthing forms without belief, as F. W. suggests in his report of Ruckwood's death analyzed above. The use of "studied" in Malcolm's phrase could insinuate an even less favorable portrait if we interpret the following line "the dearest thing he ow'd" not as the body but instead as the soul, as suggested by Kenneth Muir.

The conventional scaffold speech should educate the audience away from treason, but Cawdor's speech instead defies easy characterization since Malcolm appears to question the sincerity of the prisoner's "studied" lines. Further, when considered in light of early modern scaffold speech pamphlets, such a formulaic account raises doubts about the authenticity of the report itself. If such dying last words pamphlets elicited skepticism from their readership, then Malcolm's report may have provoked equal suspicion from the theatre audience. Like a pamphleteer, Malcolm demonstrates his ability to manipulate language, creating a convenient fiction for the benefit of the crown, a point to which I shall return below.

If Malcolm's report on the execution highlights the insidious power of treason to confuse truthful speech and "studied" falsehood, then Duncan is perhaps the only viewer who fails to learn this lesson. In response to the report, the king offers a short commentary, laced with dramatic irony as many critics have noted: "There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face: / He was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust—[Enter Macbeth …]" (1.4.11-14). Unable to detect the "mind" in the "face," the king becomes a victim of Macbeth's false hospitality at Inverness where he is murdered. On one level, Duncan here serves as a symbol of untarnished monarchy, unable to see, and therefore untainted by, treason. The play appears to reinforce Duncan's sanctified rule by highlighting his baffled response to Cawdor's treason, in contrast to the
ambitious Macbeths: in the scene after Cawdor's execution, and immediately following Macbeth's promotion, Lady Macbeth recommends the treasonous duplicity between “mind” and “face” to her husband, urging him to “[o]nly look up clear” as he welcomes, and contemplates killing, Duncan (1.5.71). While Duncan's “gentle senses” (1.6.3) celebrate the sweet air at Inverness, Lady Macbeth summons an atmosphere of “thick Night,” filled with the “dunnet smoke of Hell” (1.5.50-51), anticipating Macbeth's own “Come, seeing Night” speech (3.2.46-55). In its portrait of the Macbeths, the play thus rehearses the most sensational portraits of treason, familiar from propagandistic texts such as Anthony Munday's “The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntington” (1601) in which he writes “Muffle the eye of day, / Ye gloomie clouds (the darker than my deedes, / That darker be than pitchie sable night).” Munday's depiction of treason anticipates Shakespeare's Macbeths, sketching an atmosphere in which the secretive, murderous criminal threatens the innocent monarch.

The play's apparently stark opposition between the legitimate kingship of Duncan and the murderous usurpation of Macbeth has helped, however, to mask the ways in which the play questions the propagandistic portrait of treason's horror. First, the opening scenes of the play expose Duncan's political ineptitude, borne of his inability to read the political landscape that surrounds him. Although it may be objected that Duncan's struggle with treason does not suggest his inadequate leadership but instead the fallen state of Macbeth's Scotland, such an emphasis on Macbeth as the sole source of treason ignores the political turmoil that opens the play: at war with Norway, the Scottish troops have only recently succeeded in freeing Malcolm from captivity (1.2.4-5). Further, Harry Berger reminds us that by the fourth scene of the play Duncan has encountered two rebels, and these facts “have to be set against the persistent praise of Duncan as an ideal king, the head of a harmonious state.” Furthermore, as Jonathan Goldberg argues, while Duncan's language may appear to support the play's propagandistic opposition of sovereign and traitor, his lines find their source in Holinshed's witches; as a result, he claims, “the absolute differences and moral clarity that critics have found to be Shakespeare's are [instead] … Duncan's.”

Duncan appears even more culpable if we consider, following the example of the scaffold speech pamphlets, that Malcolm's report itself may be a fabrication. If pamphleteers sought royal license and approval by producing the speeches of penitent traitors, then the very spectacle that should help reassert royal authority over the crown's subjects instead serves the opposite function: the subjects, in this case the pamphleteers, reassure the crown of its own authority through an arguably fictional genre. Duncan, a king threatened by treason from within and rebellion from without, attempts to reestablish his own political authority through his swift execution of Cawdor. Instead, not only does Cawdor's execution provoke Macbeth's treason, but it also exhibits Duncan's excessive dependence on his loyal subjects, including Rosse, who informs him of Cawdor's treason, and Malcolm who informs him of the execution. Rather than leading his subjects, Duncan, as Berger so persuasively argues, is continually in their debt, as when he proclaims to Macbeth immediately after the execution of Cawdor, “more is thy due than more than all can pay” (1.4.21). Rather than protecting his country, Duncan himself requires protection, and Malcolm's comforting but arguably fictive report of Cawdor's death only further highlights the king's heavy dependence on his own subjects.

“I AM AS I HAVE SPOKEN”: MALCOLM'S SOVEREIGNTY

While Cawdor's execution infects truthful speech in the early scenes of the play, it is the portrait of Malcolm that reinforces such linguistic and political contamination in the final act. Specifically, as I shall suggest, Malcolm's emergent leadership owes more to the deceitful tactics of Cawdor and Macbeth than to his vulnerable father's example. First, Malcolm's revolt against Macbeth is of questionable legitimacy, a point illuminated more clearly in Shakespeare's historical sources than in his play. On one level, as both the nominated Prince of Cumberland and Duncan's son, Malcolm appears to satisfy two systems of inheritance: tanistry, the traditional, Scottish system of indirect inheritance, and primogeniture, the newer system based on direct succession. Yet in nominating Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland, Duncan ignores Macbeth's equal claim to the throne through indirect succession, thereby complicating issues of legitimate inheritance in the
play; as David Norbrook argues: “there were still noblemen whose allegiance was to the older system according to which Macbeth, son of Malcolm's other daughter, would have had a strong claim” (88). In the case of Shakespeare's play, Norbrook notes that “[i]f Duncan has to nominate his son, presumably the implication is that he could have nominated someone else, that the system is not one of pure primogeniture” (94). Further, as both Michael Hawkins and David Scott Kastan perceptively maintain, despite Macbeth's usurpation of the crown, he nevertheless reigns as an anointed king and thus Malcolm remains bound to obey his rule. The doctrine of non-resistance, upheld by James himself in *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598), forbids rebellion: “the wickednesse therefore of the King can never make them that are ordained to be judged by him, to become his judges.”

Malcolm, then, arguably emerges as a Cawdor and Macbeth figure himself. Most obviously, according to the doctrine of non-resistance, he treasonously attacks a legitimate monarch. Yet, the play occludes this issue in depicting his rebellion. Instead, Malcolm's role as a Cawdor figure develops more subtly: in each of Malcolm's appearances between his father's murder and his own ascension as king, he increasingly exploits the opposition of “mind” and “face” so that, like Macbeth, he deceives his audiences onstage in order to protect himself and eventually gain the throne. First, immediately after his father's murder he separates speech from sincerity, claiming that “[t]o show an unfelt sorrow is an office / Which the false man does easy” (2.3.134-35). His connection of performance (“to show”) and falsity (“unfelt sorrow”) recalls his ambiguous attitude toward Cawdor's studied speech, since in both cases he retains a skeptical distance from sirenic speech. While Macbeth openly, and deceptively, laments the king's death, Malcolm and Donalbain remain silent, causing Malcolm to ask his brother in an aside, “Why do we hold our tongues, that most may claim / This argument for ours?” (2.3.118-19). The image of the held, or controlled, tongue powerfully contrasts with the overflow of the scene, occurring at the level both of the body, seen in Duncan's blood and Lady Macbeth's emotion, and of the tongue itself, evident in the cries of Macduff and the Macbeths. Malcolm's initial image of the held tongue could stand as a symbol for the virginal prince who is, as Janet Adelman has noted in her influential reading of the representation of masculine power in the play, “yet / Unknown to women” (4.3.125-26).

Initially questioning the association of speech and sincerity, Malcolm then begins to exploit the duplicitous potential of language as he establishes his allies in the fight against Macbeth. His exchange with Macduff in 4.3 most clearly reveals this linguistic deception; here, as Norbrook persuasively argues of Malcolm, “[p]aradoxically, it is only by modeling himself on Macbeth's own strategies of dissimulation (4.3.117-19) that he can prove Macduff's virtue” (111). Characterizing himself to Macduff as an uncontrolled libertine who would “pour the sweet milk of concord into Hell” (98), Malcolm claims that his own vices are so heinous that “when they shall be open'd, black Macbeth / Will seem as pure as snow” (52-53). He ends his list of multitudinous sins by insisting to Macduff's disbelief, “I am as I have spoken” (102). Malcolm's self-characterization directly contradicts his own behavior in the play (he is a man who is known more through silence than speech), inverting his identity in a manner parallel to the equation plaguing Scotland: “fair is foul and foul is fair.” His own statement “I am as I have spoken” ironically recalls Duncan's belief in authentic speech, invoking the earlier faith in the correspondence of speech and intent as a ruse to expose deceit.

Finally, having manipulated his audience through false speech, Malcolm ends by tricking Macbeth's troops with his illusionist battle tactics. According to the witches' prophecy, Macbeth is safe “until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him” (4.1.92-94). Such a statement reassures Macbeth, who cannot imagine this geographical impossibility: “That will never be: / Who can impress the forest; bid the tree / Unfix his earth-bound root?” (94-96). By the next act, however, we learn that it is Malcolm who “can impress the forest” and “bid the tree / Unfix” its root when he tells his troops, “Let every soldier hew him down a bough, / And bear't before him: thereby shall we shadow / The numbers of our host” (5.4.4-6). While Malcolm is ignorant of the witches' speech to Macbeth, his command nevertheless fulfills their prophecy. In attempting to “shadow / The numbers,” he implements devious tactics in order to conquer treason, since he,
like the Macbeths, proves willing to haunt the darkened shadows in order to obtain royal power.

Using deception to test Macduff's loyalty and triumph over Macbeth, Malcolm adopts the traitor's art. Ironically, while the Macbeths began the play by using language as a medium through which to deceive Duncan, as the play continues they increasingly betray themselves by speaking frankly of their treasons. Macbeth unwittingly discloses his murder of Duncan and Banquo to his nobles in the banquet scene, and Lady Macbeth famously confesses her crimes to her doctor and maid while sleepwalking. Further, unable or unwilling to recognize the witches' prophecies as misleading half-truths, Macbeth desperately clings to their speeches as authentic statements about his future, repeating “I will not be afraid of death and bane, / Till Birnam forest come to Dunsinane” as a means of consoling himself (5.3.59-60; see also 1-10). If Macbeth's demise comes in part from his unwillingness to recognize the witches' prophecies as riddles, Malcolm acknowledges and employs the riddles of language, both in the opening scene where, as I have argued, he highlights the indecipherability of Cawdor's dying words, and in the closing scenes with Macduff.

As well as exposing Malcolm's use of arguably treasonous deception in gaining the throne, the play also reinforces his distance from pious kingship, thereby frustrating our attempts to read his victory as a restoration, or establishment, of sovereign order. The scene of his misleading exchange with Macduff, for example, ends with the portrait of England's saintly King Edward whose methods deeply contrast with Malcolm's own. Describing Edward's god-given power to cure, known as “the king's touch,” the doctor reports how, “at [Edward's] touch, / Such sanctity hath Heaven given his hand, / They [the ill] presently amend” (143-45). Malcolm elaborates, saying to Macduff that the king can heal

A most miraculous work in this good King,
Which often, since my here-remain in England,
I have seen him do. How he solicits Heaven,
Himself best knows; but strangely-visited people,
All swoln and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye,
The mere despair of surgery, he cures.

[4.3.146-52]

In treating “the Evil,” namely the physical malady of scrofula, the king heals “strangely-visited people,” a descriptive phrase that recalls Scotland's own trauma under Macbeth, himself the object of strange visitations in the form of the witches, ghosts, and visions. Indeed, the description of England's “Evil” powerfully resonates in the context of Scotland's own plague with the crime of treason, a point persuasively argued by Susanne L. Wofford, who writes that the play “nostalgically invokes the English King as healer of the body private and politic—the successful doctor missing in Scotland is found in the English King who can heal by the laying on of hands.”50 While Duncan attempts to excise the treasonous plague through violent surgery, executing the criminal Cawdor, “the Evil” only multiplies, becoming “[t]he mere despair of surgery.” Edward's ability to heal through the divine gift of touch imaginatively provides a cure, fulfilling Duncan's earlier longing for an art to heal the Evil that haunted his kingdom and resulted in his death.

The model of monarchy presented in this short, idealized portrait of Edward's reign offers a powerful antidote to the bloody tyranny of Macbeth, suggesting a form of pious rule for beleaguered Scotland. Although Edward receives Malcolm in England and therefore symbolically purifies the Scottish heir, nevertheless the connection of monarchy and treason established with Cawdor's opening scaffold speech argues against the possibility of a divine monarch, independent of treasonous machinations. Juxtaposing the two episodes of 4.3, one of deception, in which Malcolm slanders himself before Macduff, and one of healing, in which Malcolm depicts Edward's curative powers, throws into high relief the contrast between the English and the Scottish contexts. Malcom's testing of Macduff exposes the tragic condition of Scotland's monarchy, which combines strong rule with traitorous arts. The contrasting portrait of Edward thus represents the illusion of divine
kingship that Malcolm and his countrymen can no longer experience.

Although the play struggles to assert a model of divine kingship in the figures of Duncan and Edward the Confessor, it ultimately challenges the ideological opposition of monarch and traitor by intertwining these roles. Macbeth's own rule most clearly undermines the distinction by combining the tactics of traitor and king. Yet even before he succeeds to the throne, Scottish kingship appears compromised by Duncan's imperceptive, vulnerable rule. Duncan dismisses interpretive arts, in part because he sees his political landscape in terms of absolutes, dividing his soldier friends from his foreign enemies. Such oppositions fail to account for the conceptual fog that hovers over Scotland, blurring the distinction between male and female, as with the witches and Lady Macbeth, and ally and traitor, as with Macbeth himself. If material, gendered bodies become indistinguishable in the play, as Marjorie Garber has so effectively argued, so too the immaterial categories of truth and falsity lose their definition: the witches' speeches defy such rigid characterization, hovering between accurate prophecy and alluring deceit. As a result, the nation's successful king combines the attributes of monarch and traitor, negotiating between legitimacy and deceit in order to establish his rule. Despite Norbrook's astute analysis that the play ends with the recuperation of authentic, public language, evident when "Macduff is able to proclaim an end to dissimulation" (111), Malcolm's trajectory from silent witness of his father's murder to deceptive leader who tricks Macbeth undermines such assurances. Rather than offering, as Norbrook suggests, "not just a restoration but the foundation of a new and more stable order" (112), Malcolm's accession in the play tragically demonstrates that only by adopting the tools of the traitor can the king triumph on Scotland's foggy heath.

Ironically, if state spectacles should instruct potential traitors to abstain from transgressing, in the case of Macbeth, the traitor's tricks instead educate the country's future rulers. Specifically, the initial spectacle of Cawdor's execution backfires, since rather than inspiring loyalty it teaches Malcolm the value of deceptive rhetoric and bolsters Macbeth's ambition for the crown. Staging Malcolm's tragic education at the hands of Cawdor and Macbeth, the play presses on the boundaries of English Renaissance model of tragedy. Rather than confirming the didacticism implied in Sidney's definition, the play instead reinforces the more radical implications of his model: tragedy imagines a theatrical world in which the political and epistemological oppositions between king and traitor, innocent and guilty, internal and external, bleed into one another. The tragic genre as represented in Macbeth thus exposes how the transgressions of witches and traitors lie in the tissue of each spectator as well, hidden just beneath the surface and waiting to be exposed on the tragic scaffold.

MACBETH'S DYING SPEECH

Opening with the failed didacticism of Cawdor, Macbeth ends with Malcolm's alleged triumph over treason. But amidst the celebration of Malcolm's victory lies a ghost plot, haunting the final scene. This ghost plot concerns the manner of Macbeth's death, a topic that plagues him for the second half of the play. Given the doubling of Macbeth and Cawdor, both in name and in deed, Macbeth's death has already been written in Cawdor's in the first act. To make the spectral relation complete, Macbeth should follow his namesake's example, didactically confessing in the final scene, and allowing his title to pass to yet another presumably traitorous Cawdor. This plot-not-taken remains a possibility until the end, a possibility that seems all the stronger given the historical precedent of traitors who, despite their fierce challenges to authority, appear to repent in their final moments.

Juxtaposing the deaths of the two Cawdors highlights the tragic power of Macbeth's decision to embrace bloodshed as a means of carving his own end. His manner of dying opposes that of his earlier namesake: while Cawdor's speech recalls the dying last words of the vast majority of traitors, Macbeth becomes a bestial fighter who defies human expectation. His death betrays a fiendish intensity challenging not only the state that the king had formerly ruled but also the religious faith to which he is expected to turn. Realizing that the riddling prophecies of the witches are fulfilled, Macbeth, like Marlowe's Faustus, condemns himself to hell on
stage, presenting the audience with a vision of terror: the transgressive subject refuses or is unable to repent, therefore damning himself before our eyes. Cawdor, in the conventional manner, offers himself to a theatre of execution watching rapt as he utters his last words, be they authentic, insincere, or entirely fictional. In violent contrast to this allegedly docile subject on the scaffold, Macbeth cries “before my body / I throw my warlike shield” (5.8.32-33). In doing so, he challenges the relation of spectator and actor that operates on the scaffold by forcing us to examine our own generic expectations for repentance and restoration even as we gaze at him. As with Perseus’s triumph over Medusa, Macbeth turns his spectral shield to the audience, opposing the conventions for pious death and allowing himself, momentarily, to triumph. Denying expectation, damning himself, yet famously inventing his own plot, Macbeth reveals Cawdor's formula to be weak art indeed.

Notes


6. George Puttenham, in The Arte of English Poesie (1589), shares Sidney's view of tragedy as educative, writing how “the bad and illawdable parts of all estates and degrees were taxed by the Poets in one sort or an other and those of great Princes by Tragedie in especial, and not till after their deaths … to th'intent that such exemplifying (as it were) of their blames and adversities, being now dead, might worke for a secret reprehension to others that were alive, living in the same or like abuses …” (D2v).


9. Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (London: Methuen, 1986), 130; see especially the chapter entitled “The Theater of Punishment: Jacobean Tragedy and the Politics of Misogyny.” See also Antonia Fraser, who writes that the play “is a work redolent with outrage at the monstrous upsetting of the natural order, which is brought about when subjects kill their lawful sovereign,” *Faith*, 280, and Alvin Kernan's forceful argument, in *Shakespeare, the King's Playwright: Theater in the Stuart Court, 1603-1613* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), that Shakespeare transformed Holinshed “to fit his patron's political myth,” creating a story that conveys “a sacred event in the history of divine-right legitimacy” (78).


11. See also Janet Adelman, who offers a powerful reading of Duncan's corpse as a Medusa figure in *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 133, especially the chapter entitled “Escaping the Matrix: The Construction of Masculinity in Macbeth and Coriolanus.”

12. Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage*. Although Mullaney argues that the liberty of the theatre to comment on dominant cultures diminishes as it becomes a more permanent feature of the London landscape, his chapter on *Macbeth* nevertheless demonstrates the play's oppositional potential. My analysis of the play is indebted to his own. Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.


22. “A True Relation of all such things as passed at the Execution of M. Garnet, the third of May, anno 1606” in “A True and Perfect Relation of the Whole Proceedings against the late most barbarous traitors” (London: Robert Barker, 1606), sig. Fff3v.


25. For a mention of Francis Robinson, see Sharpe, “Last Dying Speeches,” 150.


29. Ibid., sig. B4r.


31. The form of his spiritual contrition, however, could break convention and provoke the audience, as in the case of Catholic prisoners who uttered prayers while making the sign of the cross. The Catholic prayers of Gunpowder plotter Sir Everard Digby were condemned by the pamphleteer who recorded the incident as “vain and superstitious crossing” in “The Arahaignement and Execution of the late Traytors.”


35. Cobbett and Howell, Cobbett's, vol. 1, 1413.
36. “Araignement and Execution,” sig. B2v. Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.


37. Early modern law condemned the prophecy of a sovereign's death as treason since, according to 25 Edw. III, st.5 c.2 and Eliz. I, c.1, it was to “imagine … bodily harme to the King or Queene or heires apparent” or “deprive them of the dignity, title, or name of their royal estates.” Cited in Statutes of the Realm, Vol. 1 (Record Commission, 1810-28), 319-20; and in “An Exposition of Certain Difficult and obscure words and terms of the Lawes of this Realme” (London: 1592).


40. I am grateful to Susanne L. Wofford for help with this point.


42. The example of William Parry's attempted treason against Elizabeth helps verify the association of monarchical authority with exposing 'the mind in the face,' further suggesting Duncan's inadequacy. Parry had conspired with Mary, Queen of Scots to assassinate Elizabeth in 1585, yet finding himself alone with the Queen, rather than murdering her as he had planned, he instead confessed his plot, perhaps under the mistaken assumption that he might receive a reward. See Raphael Holinshed, Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland (London: J. Johnson, 1807-8) Vol. 4: 561-63; Guy, Tudor England, 332, 444; Wallace MacCaffrey, Elizabeth I (New York: Edward Arnold, 1993), 344.


Duncan is no very impressive judge of character” (94). Subsequent references to Norbrook will be included parenthetically in the text.


47. The Trew Law (Edinburgh, 1598). See also Hawkins, “History,” 177 and David Scott Kastan's insightful reading of the play, which notes the doubling of the Norwegian rebellion that opens the play in Malcolm's rebellion in the final act in Shakespeare After Theory (London: Routledge, 1999), 177.


49. While the scene with Macduff has been characterized as a perfunctory paraphrase from Holinshed, Marvin Rosenberg has reminded us of the theatrical success of this suspenseful scene, particularly for spectators who do not know the outcome in advance; see The Masks of Macbeth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 543. On the relationship between the texts of Shakespeare and Holinshed, see also Goldberg, “Speculations”; Hawkins, “History”; and Norbrook, “Macbeth.”


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Criticism: Themes: David L. Kranz (essay date summer 2003)


[In the following essay, Kranz examines the structural and thematic implications of Shakespeare's use of repetitive poetry in Macbeth, particularly emphasizing how the witches' words are echoed in the linguistic patterns of the other characters in the play.]

It is a commonplace among critics of Macbeth to point out that the eponymous hero's first words echo a similarly antithetical line chanted by the witches in the opening scene of the play. Macbeth's “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (1.3.38) is noteworthy not only because it reiterates a paradoxical statement, but because it refers back to the very beginning of the play rather than to the sorceries which have just preceded Macbeth's arrival in the third scene.¹ Macbeth cannot have overheard the “fair is foul” antithesis of the witches; instead, it seems to come to his mind out of the very thick air. Whether readers and audiences infer that Macbeth and the witches speak the same language by mere chance or that the latter's words have infiltrated the hero's mind simply by proximity, a close and mysterious connection between the hero and the supernatural hags is established well before the actual staged temptation of the former. Thus it is by means of verbal echo, not dramatic confrontation, that Shakespeare first connects Macbeth to the Weird Sisters.²

What is repeated in Macbeth's iteration is obviously morphemic and semantic, a matter of individual words and their juxtaposed contrary meanings. But the repeated words “foul and fair” are part of a line that has distinct rhetorical and rhythmic properties as well. Fricative alliteration reinforces the repetition, and the completely monosyllabic nature of the line crisply highlights its iambic meter. Poetic patterns, not simply repeated words, play a part in suggesting to an audience the mysterious source for Macbeth's subjective
commentary on the day's battle or its weather.

Later in the third scene, Shakespeare calls explicit attention to the poetic continuities that exist between the supernatural and human characters. Fifty lines after Macbeth's words on the day's vicissitudes, after the witches hail Macbeth and Banquo three times and give them three predictions, and after the witches vanish, the two soldiers reiterate the gist of the surprising prophecies:

MACB.:

Your children shall be kings.

BAN.:

MACB.:

And Thane of Cawdor too; went it not so?

BAN.:

To th' selfsame tune, and words. Who's here?

(1.3.86-88)

This brief stichomythia is followed immediately by the arrival of Rosse and Angus, who announce that Macbeth actually has been named Thane of Cawdor. The audience, of course, has known of Macbeth's advancement since the end of 1.2, where in words and rhyme reminiscent of the witches' opener, Duncan orders in one breath the “death” of Cawdor and the removal of his title to “Macbeth,” after which Rosse responds, “I'll see it done,” and the king redundantly notes in closing, “What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won” (1.2.66-69). At the end of 1.3, this repeated announcement sends Macbeth into rapt asides so intriguing that little, if any, attention has been focused on the words of Banquo and Macbeth I have quoted.

The lines, however, clearly imply an intimate relationship between the witches' words and the hero's words. Banquo's answer to Macbeth's query about the accuracy of his remembrance of the witches' prophecies, moreover, refers not only to the repeated “words” themselves but to the “tune” with which Macbeth has accompanied them. Banquo says that Macbeth's rendition is “selfsame,” although on the page neither word nor rhythm is perfectly identical to the earlier predictions. The order, for example, is exactly reversed, and all the hailings are gone. Perhaps, then, Banquo is only joking. It is more likely, however, that Macbeth has imitated the speech of the witches. That he has done so, or rather that Banquo and Macbeth have together done so, is hinted in the repetitive rhetorical structure of the lines: three separate phrases, the second of which repeats the first with nearly identical syntax and the same end-word, “King.”

Metrically, the Scots' remembrance does not recapitulate exactly the largely iambic (with some trochaic) feminine pentameters characteristic of the witches' prophetic greetings to Macbeth, nor the largely trochaic (with some iambic and ambiguous, possibly spondaic) tetrameters characteristic of the prophecies about Banquo, nor the flexible seven-syllable verse heard in the chiasmic repetition of final hails to both Scots. But in the soldiers' later colloquy, the strong iambic regularity of the three three-foot phrases preceding full-stop caesuras and the two mirrored (trochee-iamb) two-foot phrases at the ends of the first two lines adumbrate the major meters of the sisters' speeches and emphasize the repeated two- and three-foot phrases distinctive in them. Thus, as Macbeth's first words call attention to a strange linguistic similarity, so do the lines that close the hero's initial confrontation with the Weird Sisters. In these lines, however, Shakespeare has Banquo...
comment on the form and style of Macbeth's reiteration, and since we already know what Macbeth says is true, only how he says it matters here.

What follows is an analysis of poetic repetition, verbal sameness (but not exactitude) in Macbeth. Beginning with a look at the witches' tune and then showing several ways that weird music shows up (and sometimes does not appear) in the speech of other characters throughout the tragedy, I shall attempt to expose the thick clusters of repeated sounds that help express whatever it is the witches represent and serve. While purely dictional echoes of the language of the witches in the mouths of the two main characters and general patterns of linguistic repetition throughout the tragedy have long been noted, this analysis will delineate for the first time a variety of repetitive formulae, their common shape, at what points in the play they are strong or weak, and how they operate in characters, like the Porter, whose surname is not Macbeth.

The mapping suggests that the influence of the witches extends itself substantially to the inner thoughts of key figures at Inverness and also, but much less so, to the public pronouncements of more overtly orthodox Christian characters. The witches' tune and words are heard, however slightly, in almost every scene, and are even perceptible in the speeches of the anti-tyrannical Scots toward the end of the play. This range and distribution suggests that the poetic patterns represent powers that include but go beyond the demonic. Finally, I will explore the contextual complexity of the poetic phenomena and suggest how the distinctive style of Macbeth, more fully understood, might help mediate between conflicting interpretations of the tragedy in the last century.

I

If Macbeth can imitate the Weird Sisters both unconsciously and consciously in 1.3, so can the play's audience, for it has heard the witches' tune in at least two (if not all) of the first three scenes. In fact, an audience has only to witness the always significant and proleptic Shakespearean first scene and experience the sisters' "sickening see-saw" speech to have their repetitive poetry indelibly imprinted on its collective mind:

1 WITCH:
When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

2 WITCH:
When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

3 WITCH:
That will be ere the set of sun.

1 WITCH:
Where the place?

2 WITCH:
Upon the heath.

3 WITCH:
There to meet with Macbeth.
1 WITCH:
I come, Graymalkin!

2 WITCH:
Paddock calls.

3 WITCH:
Anon!

ALL:
Fair is foul, and foul is fair:
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

(1.1.1-12)

Most critical discussion of this dialogue has been concerned with the paradoxical semantic quality of the witches’ language and the obvious rhetorical dualities that support such polarities. The “fair is foul” antithesis and other paradoxes have often been seen as linguistic reflections of the witches’ diabolical purpose to create not just stormy weather but cosmological disorders of great magnitude. Language full of antithesis and inversion, that is, reflects in its grammatical fusion and confusion of opposites a world without difference and thus without the individuation so necessary to make orderly sense of things. From a Christian perspective (not the only one licensed by the play’s text, of course), a day that is “foul and fair” suggests the state of that primordial ocean in Genesis which necessitated, besides light, the firmament of God’s creation to establish boundaries for understanding. Thus, the paradoxes in the witches’ language are a perfect expression of the essence of forces in the world that work against the rational order God created in the beginning. These chaotic dimensions are explicitly stated in a number of lines, most notably in Macbeth’s conjuring of the witches in the cauldron scene (4.1.50-61). Moreover, the repeated imagery of day and night or light and dark, like the play’s focus on time, is implicitly relevant to the biblical version of the origin of the cosmos. As many have noted, Macbeth makes clear the resultant disorder in the universe when degree is shaken by forces that speak in antitheses.

But this interpretation, while somewhat compelling, is incomplete. For the language of the Weird Sisters is not simply polar and paradoxical; it is not simply double-talk. Rather, the tune and words of the witches’ lines are dominated by poetic repetitions as well as semantic oppositions. Through the most self-conscious manipulation of poetry—including diction, rhyme, alliteration, anaphora, chiasmus, rhythm, and meter—Shakespeare clogs the witches’ verse with repetitive forms, doubling, tripling, and even quadrupling them. Indeed, the manner of the Weird Sisters’ speech is at least as prominent as its meaning.

Opening scenes are supposed to “set the scene,” giving the audience temporal and spatial bearings. Here, the witches ask the right questions (when, where, how), but their answers are terribly vague and unsatisfying (sometime after the battle and before sunset, on the heath, and by hovering). Their tune, however, provides something memorable to fill the ideational blanks: repeated sounds. As far as rhyme is concerned, there are three couplets, one triplet, and three short unrhymed lines. If we look at the beginning of the lines, in addition, we find an unlikely “Where. … There” (1.1.6-7) rhyme, which is eventually picked up in “Fair” (11). Lines 3-6, the triplet, contain the internal rhyming of “hurly-burly,” the second and third repetition of the opening “When” clause, and the rhythmically similar short sentences, “Where the place? Upon the heath.” Finally, the famous eleventh line is a chiasmus, a reversed repetition, and the line’s alliteration is repeated a third and
fourth time in the “fog and filthy air” phrase that follows (11-12). No other lines in Shakespeare, neither the fairies' talk in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* nor the satirized bad poetry of *Love's Labor's Lost*, much less the verse of supernatural characters elsewhere in Shakespeare, can match this concatenation of sounds, this poetic compulsion to repetition.7

The meter is even more interesting. One scholar calls the major metrical form here trochaic tetrameter catalectic but thinks it “is better described as a seven-syllable verse—used with the freedom of doggerel in a way characteristic of a child's mind.”8 In a play full of children and the lack thereof, the childish appeal of a nursery rhyme is not inappropriate. As the child's mind is often distinguished both by its imaginative capacities and its love of poetic repetition, moreover, it is not surprising that the witches' words so easily seduce Macbeth, whose imagination so dominates his character, whose achievement of manhood is always in question, and whose repeated attempts to demonstrate the independence of imagined adulthood so often involves attacks on the children of others. Western European fairy tales, of course, consistently present witches seducing children into danger.

Carefully scanned, however, not much of the verse of the witches here and elsewhere is as rough and jerky as doggerel, though it is heavy-footed and variable.9 Six of the first seven lines, for example, are very regular trochaic tetrameter catalectic, the only variant being the spondee in the second foot of line 1, which emphasizes both the word “three” and the internal e rhyme in the line. (The sixth line, of course, is shared by two speakers.) Line 2 is iambic tetrameter, though broken into three phrases by caesuras, and the seventh is either trochaic trimeter with an iambic third foot or two amphimacer feet, an alteration that underlines the off-rhymed consonance (*heath-beth*) in line 8 which adds finality to the locational questions posed and answered by the sisters. Overall, the dominant trochaic tetrameter catalectic lines function to underscore stylistic repetitions. Lines 2 through 4, for example, besides offering an isomorphic metrical triplet, highlight with heavy stress both the *done-won-sun* rhyme and the last two of the three “When” openers that begin the play.

The final lines of the scene, as printed by most modern editors, begin with short outbursts in prose from each of the three witches and then a unison chant of two lines, the first in trochaic tetrameter catalectic and the second in either iambic tetrameter with a trochaic first foot (if “Hover” is elided) or trochaic tetrameter with an extra syllable. I think, nevertheless, that lines normally numbered 8 through 10 are a triple sharing of one iambic pentameter line: “I come, Graymalkin. Paddock calls. Anon.” While taking nothing away from the triplicity of the prose reading, such a scansion is consistent with the sisters' verse overall. The witches are seldom prosaic in any sense of the word. (The Folio, however, has all three witches prefix “Padock calls anon” to line 11, creating a six-foot line with a heavy caesura that breaks the pattern of the preceding lines, thereby obfuscating the usual triple sharing of them and their metrical pattern while also reducing the symmetry of the final couplet. I think that modern editors, for logical and structural reasons, have improved the text but have fallen short of a typography that would enable visualization of the pentameter.) Finally, the metrical construction of the famous final couplet functions to highlight the chiasmic antithesis in the two pairs of *f*-alliterated words heard in the first line, only to emphasize the explanatory consistency of the third pair of *f*-alliterated words in the last line. (Simultaneously, the caesura in line 11 breaks the alliterated pairs into three phrases.) Also, the stress of the last lines falls heavily on the “fair” repetition/internal rhyme and the *fair-air* end rhyme, another stylistic doubling and tripling.

What is the significance of this? On the one hand, the tune clearly distinguishes the witches from the human characters, who always speak in blank verse, rhymed iambic pentameter, or prose. But like their human counterparts, on the other hand, the witches speak with neither perfect metrical regularity nor with the “freedom of doggerel.” They speak in a variety of unusual but largely regular meters, including iambic pentameter. Their verse does not, as some have supposed, render them wholly diabolical and inhuman. Most interestingly, their predominant line here, trochaic tetrameter catalectic with a strong caesura (“Fair is foul, and foul is fair”), is really an ambiguous conflation of both trochaic and iambic feet. It begins strongly
trochaic but feels iambic after the break, a kind of metronomic seesaw as noted above. Their meter, then, is an appropriate rhythmic vehicle for the paradoxical semantics, occasional rhymes, and often chiasmic repetition of the words it underscores. The medium of poetry is, in part, the message of the witches; Shakespeare used all his poetic powers to craft this short opening scene.

By contrast, the second scene in act 1 has over five times the number of lines, and the stylistic patterns heard in the first scene are greatly diminished. Rhymes and repetitions per line are a fraction of what has been heard before, and the characters, now human simulacra, speak no childish tetrameters. The blank verse in scene 2 also contains numerous metrical irregularities, so-called “feminine” endings, extra or missing syllables, and sharply cauterized lines (1.2.20, 38, 42, 52, 60, 68) characteristic of Shakespeare's mature style.

There are, however, a few signs of similarity between the scenes; a small number of dictional and alliterative repetitions can be detected. For example, the bloodied and weakened captain describes in mirroring phraseology how “merciless Macdonwald / Worthy to be a rebel” is aided by Fortune “like a rebel's whore,” yet he is still unseamed by “brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),” who disdains Fortune “Like Valor's minion” (1.2.9-23). The wounded captain then reports that “Bellona's bridegroom” and Banquo, “As cannons overcharg'd with double cracks; / So they / Doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe” (37-39), after which, as noted above, Duncan gives Cawdor's title to Macbeth in couplets, with help from Rosse (66-69). These lines, of course, unlike many delivered by the witches, are not full of paradox; they do not outrun pausing reason, our orderly cognition. Yet the lines contain our first description of Macbeth, and however diminished in quantity and mystery, the few doublings and triplings noted may unconsciously associate the titular hero with the Weird Sisters. Overall, however, scene 2 is a poetic contrast to its predecessor.

The next scene is marked by the immediate return of the witches and many more repetitive formulae: “And mounched” thrice (1.3.5), “I'll do” thrice (10), “show me” twice (27), “A drum” twice (30), “All hail” thrice (48-50), “Hail” thrice (62-64), and “So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo! / Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!” (67-68). Furthermore, the witches end their charm against the sailor with the following:

The Weird Sisters, hand in hand,
Posters of the sea and land,
Thus do go about, about:
Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
And thrice again, to make up nine
Peace!—the charm's wound up.

(1.3.32-37)

Both the tetrameter (trochaic catalectic and iambic) and the rhymed couplets underscore the dictional repetition here, as they do in most of the witches’ verse throughout the scene. Thus the repetitive essence of the witches' tune is highlighted by their return in 1.3 as well as by Macbeth and Banquo's aforementioned imitation of them later in the scene.

But can anyone hear the witches' tune? H. N. Paul believes that the witches' poetry is “the controlling influence which the dramatist never lets the audience forget. This influence is felt by anyone who has ears to hear.” However, in our oculocentric age, not many in a typical audience (except, perhaps, some rappers) will recognize the repetitive stylistic formulae even after the witches' chanting and the attention paid to their tune and words by Macbeth and Banquo. Even fewer, if any, will recognize the occasional music in 1.2. By contrast, Renaissance English playgoers might easily hear these repetitive stylistic patterns. While the plays were spectacles for many, especially the poorest and least educated, we know from The Taming of the Shrew (Induction.1.92) that Shakespeare and his contemporaries spoke also of “hearing” a play, and we know too that the highly rhetorical Renaissance education and the preponderance of poetry in the art of the age would train, by study and experience, a finer ear than we possess. Ann Cook argues for the predominance of
“privileged audiences with superior educations,” and Coburn Freer suggests that Shakespeare's audience "would have been able to hear the meter of the verse and the rhythmic patterns superimposed upon it." Even if audiences in public theaters were not all or always so sensitive and thoughtful, it is probable that Macbeth was written to be first presented in court, where one of the most cultured and intelligent audiences that could be assembled in England would hear it. Such an audience might be aware of the finest of rhythmic and rhetorical repetitions and knowledgeable enough to make educated guesses about their significance. Finally, the dramatic poet who deftly shifts between blank verse and prose in plays like 1 Henry IV or who embeds a sonnet in Romeo and Juliet must have some confidence in the ear of his audience.

Having re-established their characteristic music in 1.3, the Weird Sisters disappear, for Shakespeare if not for an interpolator, until the inception of act 4:

1 WITCH:
Thrice the brinded cat hath mew'd.

2 WITCH:
Thrice, and once the hedge-pig whin'd.

3 WITCH:
Harpyer cries:—'Tis time, 'tis time.

(4.1.1-3)

In the sisters' return here, their characteristic poetry contrasts immediately with the plain blank verse of Lenox and a Lord in the preceding scene. The witches' dictional doublings in unrhymed trochaic tetrameter catalectic soon give way to even more characteristic rhymed couplets in the same handful of meters analyzed earlier, though these verses repeat few words, even during the famous chorus: “Double, double, toil and trouble, / Fire burn; and, cauldron, bubble,” which is heard three times (10-11, 20-21, 35-36). While dictional repetition wanes, however, the sisters’ brew of selected body parts from slimy, nocturnal, violent animals, from infidels, and from dead babies is flavored with rhyme (e.g., “double … bubble … trouble”), heavy alliteration (e.g., “Lizard's leg,” “Gall of goat,” “Turk, and Tartar's”), and largely mono- and disyllabic diction. As Macbeth approaches, moreover, we find internal rhyme (46-47, but a single line in the Folio) and three perfect iambic feet that immediately follow two iambs by the hero (49). This musical yoking of Macbeth and the Weird Sisters is repeated when the latter answer Macbeth's question by completing in one, two, and then three syllables a perfect feminine iambic pentameter line: “To what I ask you. / Speak. / Demand. / We'll answer” (61). Two more shared lines follow, one in a pentameter so un rhythmic it sounds like prose (62-63) and another in iambic pentameter with a trochaic opening foot (69). Finally, the witches respond individually to Macbeth's demand to see Banquo's descendants with a triple “Show!” (107-9), repeating the word again to begin their final joint couplet (110). Clearly, something close to the original version of the selfsame tune is back.

The apparitions created by the sisters and presented to Macbeth speak largely in iambic pentameter couplets, and the first two repeat the hero's name three times each (71, 76). They also match iambic trimeter lines (76-78) or link split pentameters with the witches and Macbeth (89, 94, 103). Meanwhile, Macbeth's verse by itself seems touched with weird repetition. Upon arrival, for example, his demands begin with “I conjure you … answer me” and end with “answer me / To what I ask you,” between which six “though” clauses intervene (50-61). He uses the phrase “assurance double sure” (83) in responding to the second apparition, moreover, and tacks on three iambic pentameter couplets to that apparition's two, sharing a fourth couplet with the crowned child (90-101).
Macbeth's reaction to the show of Banquo and the eight kings, however, is not couched in obvious repetitive formulae. This is perhaps appropriate since this vision, unlike the others, leaves him shattered by a fate he cannot control, one result of which is his frustration-driven attack on the dynastically irrelevant family of Macduff. Nevertheless, his words might be repetitive in performance since they redundantly verbalize the vision that he and the audience see, since he notes that the golden hair of the kings is much alike (113-15), and since he repeatedly interrupts his description with angry interjections (111, 115, 116, 118, 122, 124). Finally, although the last twenty lines of the scene, in which Macbeth returns to human company (Lenox), show little evidence of repetition, Macbeth's vow that “The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand” (147-48) and the couplet that closes the speech (153-54) hint of the selfsame tune. As in the third scene of act 1, then, Macbeth's speech is linked to that of the witches in a number of ways, though his repetitions of word and sound are less intense and numerous than those of his supernatural solicitors.13

In summary, Shakespeare has clearly established unique auditory patterns at the very beginning of the play, called our attention to them, and brought them back later. The patterns become, I think, a kind of poetic signature for the ambiguous, partly supernatural characters who utter them. But Shakespeare has also suggestively linked some of the patterns to human characters. It is to further description of that linkage that I now turn.

II

While the witches disappear near the end of 1.3, many of the poetic patterns they engendered do not. The selfsame tune, the aural embodiment of their unholy spirit, makes its way into the mouths of several characters. Although now in blank verse, prose, or occasional pentameter couplets, many repetitions in word and tune emerge throughout the rest of the play, most notably in the lines of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and the Porter, especially in private moments when their imaginations are relatively unfettered by the need to keep up public appearances. For example, when Macbeth exits from Duncan's presence after hearing the latter announce the succession of Malcolm, what were only modest repetitive notes (1.4.20-32) or none (33-47) in public conversation with Duncan become, in an aside, three rhymed couplets in which the titular hero invokes the stars three times to hide his evil desires while letting that be done which he fears to expose (48-53). Equally patterned are the soliloquies of Lady Macbeth in the next scene. She begins with an echo of the witches' prophecy and her spouse's report of it, caesuras highlighting the two titles achieved and the third which awaits: “Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be / What thou are promis'd” (1.5.15-16). There follows an analysis of her husband chock full of the selfsame tune:

Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win; thou'dst have, great Glamis,
That which cries, 'Thus thou must do,' if thou have it;
And that which rather thou dost fear to do,
Than wishest should be undone.

(1.5.18-25)

She then makes her treble invocations to the “murder ministers” and “sightless substances” to “Come” (three times) and invade her body (40-54), finally greeting Macbeth with another repetition of her opening triad, “Great Glamis! Worthy Cawdor! / Greater than both by the all-hail hereafter!” (54-55), again in imitation of witches she has never seen.14

But the most striking example of the witches' tune in the human mind is Macbeth's famous soliloquy at Inverness:
MACB.:  
If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well  
It were done quickly: if th' assassination  
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch  
With his surcease success; that but this blow  
Might be the be-all and the end-all—here,  
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,  
We'd jump the life to come.—But in these cases,  
We still have judgment here.

(1.7.1-8)

After merely minor repetitions in the intervening scene (1.6), the patterns in this speech (only a part of which I have quoted in the interest of brevity) seem crafted to bring the supernatural powers to mind. The first line and a half present an array of triples: three phrases beginning “it were” and three ending with “done” (perhaps echoing the first witch’s “I'll do, I'll do, I'll do” at 1.3.10). The remainder of the long first sentence doubles the conditional nature of its beginning, repeating the “if,” and then presents its own series of doubled and tripled alliterative and repetitive terms: “could … consequences … catch,” “surcease success,” “but … blow,” “be … be-all,” “be-all … end-all,” and “here, / But here … / But … here.”

Alliterative verbal patterning continues occasionally in the rest of the speech, but more striking are the longer patterns taken by Macbeth’s thoughts on Duncan in lines 12 through 25. Macbeth says Duncan is at Inverness “in double trust” but then gives three reasons for that trust—kin, subject, host—within two rhetorical structures (“First … then”). Next, Macbeth adds a third and fourth structure (“Besides”) when he cites Duncan’s virtues and the likely universal reaction their “taking-off” will cause. These patterns, it should be noted, occur in speech that is not illogical in thought or antithetical in form, though it is full of conscience and wishful imagination. In fact, Macbeth decides on the basis of this meditation to call off the immoral deed. However, the music of his thought and the quantitative inexactitude of his reasoning subtly expose the strength of the unconscious wishes he has previously acknowledged to us, wishes his lady will count on. Thus, when Lady Macbeth attacks his manhood and reassures him of success a mere fifty lines after this resolution to be faithful to Duncan, Macbeth promises quite mysteriously and quickly to “bend up / Each corporal agent” (1.7.80-81) to do the deed, as though he harbors the same “sightless substances” his wife had called to invade her being. Interestingly, their dialogue contains some repetitive elements: for instance, “I dare do all … Who dares do more” (46-47), “then you were a man … be more than what you were … Be so much more the man” (49-51), “make … made … unmake” (52-54), “fail … fail? … fail” (58-61), and various alliterations (65-69). But it is Macbeth’s final lines that most clearly echo the music of the witches in their diction, alliteration, and rhyme: “Away, and mock the time with fairest show: / False face must hide what the false heart doth know” (82-83).

The opening scene of act 2 gives us a clearer sense of Shakespeare’s stylistic designs because when Banquo and Fleance speak with Macbeth, their lines exhibit no repetition and only minimal alliteration. The lines themselves, significantly, express what Banquo believes is a victory, supported by “Merciful Powers” (2.1.7), over thoughts stirred up by dreams of the witches (20). No evil desires, no music. But later, when Macbeth, in soliloquy, sees a visionary dagger, associates himself with witchcraft, and moves toward Duncan’s chamber
(33-64), lines reminiscent of the witches return: for example, the repetition of “Is this a dagger, which I see before me, … yet I see thee still … I see thee yet … I see thee still”; the alliteration of “world … wicked … witchcraft … withered … wolf … watch”; and two pairs of couplets at the end, separated by the ringing of a bell and a line acknowledging its invitation to get the deed “done.” Express evil desires in image and action, especially when alone, and bells ring during musical speech. The assassination, of course, is not seen: we know it only in its aftermath through the conversation of the conspirators. That is, the audience only hears about it through repetitions of “done,” “deed,” “sorry sight,” “Amen,” “sleep no more,” “hand,” and “knocking” (2.2.10-73).

The next heavy concentration of the selfsame tune and words in the speeches of Scotland's king and queen occurs in the final act, but it is now a vehicle for their pain. We last hear the strange rhythms during Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene and her husband's soliloquy at her death. In the former, the Lady speaks the witches' sing-song with eyes open but sense shut, and we get a rare glimpse of her unconscious mind as it expresses the horror of compulsive guilt, symbolized as well in gesture by her repetitious, unsuccessful hand-washing. The nightmare that begins with repeated worry about a spot (5.1.30-33) ends with this extraordinary set of iterations:

To bed, to bed: there's knocking at the gate.  
Come, come, come, come, give me your hand.  
What's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed.  

(5.1.63-65)

All of her words are fixed on past actions, which she relives in the unchronological, repetitive, and circular order suggestive of mental disturbance, of Freudian primary process brought to the surface of consciousness. For example, she begins with the blood stains discovered after Duncan's murder (30, 33), reverts to the bell that sends Macbeth to do the deed (33-34), goes back even further to the words by which she persuaded her fearful husband to act (35-37), comes back to the murder (37-38), speaks of Lady Macduff's demise (40), repeats her worries about bloodstained hands (41, 47-48) and post-mortem directions to Macbeth (42-43, 58-59), speaks “yet again” about Banquo's ghost (59-60), and finally returns to the knocking at the gate (63-65).

Poetic patterns reinforce these repetitive topics. Lady Macbeth demands twice that the “spot” clean itself “out” and counts to two, reliving the timing of the bell (30-33). Two phrases remind us of the witches: “Hell is murky” (34) and the nursery-rhyme line, “The Thane of Fife had a wife” (40). Moreover, she admonishes her lord twice with “No more o’ that” (42), speaks of the smell of blood in two phrases (47-48), says “Oh” thrice (49), commands her husband three times (58-59), and ends her sleep-talking with a pair of demands to go “To bed,” four behests to “come,” the rhyming and repetitive claim that “What's done cannot be undone,” and three more commands “To bed” (63-65).

Meanwhile, the Doctor who has watched twice before but only seen her sleepwalk on this third night, analyzes the queen's nocturnal performance in repetitions too: “Well, well, well” (53), “Go to, go to” (44), “Unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles” (68-69), “God, god, forgive us all” (72), and “So, good night: / My mind she has mated, and amazed my sight” (74-75). In addition, the godly Gentlewoman who also attends (see ll. 46 and 54) no doubt supports his view that Lady Macbeth's “infected” mind more needs “the divine than the physician” (69-71); she closes the scene saying, repetitively, “Good night, good doctor” (76). Both the infected and the good speak the selfsame tune, though the queen's duplicated diction, rhyme, and alliteration are clearly more compulsive and illogical.

The last repetitive flourish for Macbeth is his famous speech to Seyton after the death of his wife (5.5.17-28). The tyrant, alone with his last loyal retainer (whose name may suggest satanic influence), waxes philosophical
about meaningless repetition in action. The speech gives us “to-morrow” thrice, “out” and “time” twice, and “day to day,” along with the alliteration of “have … hereafter,” “petty pace,” “dusty death,” “poor player,” “tale / Told,” and “full … fury,” all adding to the idea of life’s iterative futility. It is appropriate, I think, that elements of the witches’ tune cluster in a final statement of the despair that results when one develops, by choice or fate, a relationship with the mysterious powers which the witches represent.

The most powerful expression of the witches’ tune after the Macbeth’s words comes in the Porter’s speech. As many scholars have shown, this speech and its speaker do not function simply as comic relief; rather, the speech has been considered symbolic of the hellish quality of Macbeth’s castle now that Duncan is dead, and the Porter has been called a descendant of the gatekeeper in the medieval mystery play about the harrowing of hell. I would argue further that the poetic patterns in the speech, the repetitive doublings and triplings we have seen before, hint of strange forces operating in the mind of this sleepy, inebriated fellow as he experiences, mostly in soliloquy, a supernatural hangover:

[Knocking within.]

PORTER:

Here’s a knocking, indeed! If a man were Porter of Hell Gate, he should have old turning the key. [Knocking.]

(2.3.1-4)

The most striking element in the speech is the knocking, of course. Before they retire, Macbeth and his consort have responded to two knocks apiece with fear of the “knocking” (2.2.56, 64, 68, 73), and the Porter hears and responds similarly with a fifth gerund, thus linking the three characters and capping the second pair of knocks with a third. The Porter then responds to five more off-stage knocks, twice with “knock, knock, knock” (3, 12), twice with “Knock, knock” (7, 15) and once with “Anon, anon” (20) just before the entrance of Macduff and Lenox. Moreover, he asks, “Who’s there?” three times (3, 8, 13) after three of the knocks (twice asking in the name of a devil), tells three imaginary visitants to “Come in” (5, 13, 15) thrice (cf. Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy earlier), and recognizes his role as hell[portor three times (1, 17, 21), to mention the most obvious examples.

In his discussion with Macduff (22-40), furthermore, the Porter speaks of drinking until the “second cock” (24) and points out the “three things” (25) such drinking provokes, a statement which elicits from Macduff a repetition of the same phrase in the form of a question. The drunken doorman then lists the three results of drink, followed by a discourse on a fourth (lechery) in which he repeats the word “provokes” three times (once in the negative) and alliterates the term with “performance.” He then begins four sets of antitheses on the effects of liquor on lechery, framing these antitheses with remarks on drink as an “equivocator.” Finally, he puns on the word “lie” with Macduff three times. So it is not simply the Porter's dramatic heritage that allusively relates him to the witches; rather, his humorous prose is peppered with their music.

The poetic repetition in the rest of the play is much less dense. For example, the rest of this scene contains some, but much less, repetitious language. Though there are somewhat repetitive morning greetings and questions about whether Duncan is awake, minor alliteration (2.3.56, 63), Macduff’s triple “horror” (62) at the discovery of the king’s death, Donalbain’s realistic fear about “the near in blood, / The nearer bloody” (138-39), and Malcolm's closing couplet, only Macbeth's repeated orders to wake up others and his partly repetitious manner (“love” and “heart” twice, “breach” and “breech’d,” “gashed stabs” and “gore”) during the cover-up for killing the chamberlains (109-16) stand out much, if at all, in this lengthy public discourse of over a hundred lines. This diminution may relate to the public nature of the discourse and to the fact that most of the characters express orthodox medieval Christian belief as they react to the murder of the monarch. Lenox, for example, brings up simultaneous events in the natural kingdom that correspond, according to
medieval cosmology, to the king's death in the political one (53-60). Macduff, moreover, calls it “sacrilegious” to destroy the “Lord's anointed Temple” (66-67), and Banquo, suspecting deceitful treason, claims to stand “In the great hand of God” (128). As at the beginning of 2.2, Shakespeare shapes the poetic language of his characters to fit their situation and beliefs: the more godly, the less repetitive.

The last scene in the second act confirms this view. As the Old Man and Rosse report correspondent “unnatural” astronomical and animal prodigies “like the deed that's done” (2.4.11), and as Rosse and Macduff discuss appropriate public responses to the murder and its aftermath, we hear almost no repetitions. Only minor alliteration, the repetition of “Scone” (31, 35), and the now-expected final couplets (37-41) remind us, if at all, of the witches. In a public scene full of “God's benison” (40), this should come as no surprise. While there remains a sense that all Scotland is bewitched, only Macbeth and those closest to him, especially those discovered in private moments, speak the recognizably repetitious language of the witches throughout the play.

Act 3 offers only a few moments of the witches' tune and follows the pattern already established. Act 4 is similar, but here Shakespeare's manipulation of repetitions in word and sound changes slightly too. At Macduff's castle, Rosse, Lady Macduff, and her son indulge in what might be called argumentative repetition. These repeated arguments are overtly more a matter of rational debate than a matter of wish, fear, or imagination, though the psyches of both family members are not secure. Yet only Lady Macduff's description of her son, “Father'd he is, and yet he's fatherless” (4.2.27), sounds like the witches' tune. This riddle, unlike those of the Weird Sisters, however, has been solved for an audience by information about Macduff's whereabouts imparted before the scene begins. In addition, there are no rhymes or other repeated sounds in the scene.

I should also point out that this scene includes a messenger (like the servant who fights Cornwall in King Lear) who tries unsuccessfully to save the family, framing his attempt in terms that imply belief in a benign divinity: “Bless you, fair dame!” and “Heaven preserve you!” (4.2.64-71). As before, when orthodoxy appears, the witches' tune is usually minimized, though never wholly absent. Such is also the case in the next scene, the longest in the play (240 lines) and the only one set in England. The presence of orthodox religious elements, such as Macduff's description of Malcolm's saintly father and mother (4.3.108-11), or Malcolm's calls to “God above” (120) to heal the rift with Macduff and later to “Good God” (162) for help in befriending Rosse, or the miraculous heavenly cure for scrofula the English monarch possesses and passes down to his successors (140-59), may explain why the middle of this scene is lacking in much poetic iteration. Of course, the sheer length of the scene, fitting as a slow contrast to the speed of Scotland's evils, reduces one's recognition of repetitive elements in the language as well.

There are still some repetitions, however, and their context and quality begin to change. First, repetitious constructions begin to emboss public descriptions of Scotland's butcheries, including the pain and paranoia they cause. Second, the selfsame tune and words also begin to be employed in public descriptions of Christian faith by the forces that oppose Macbeth. For example, Malcolm and Macduff's opening discourse on evil in Scotland and their consequent distrust is expressed in repetitive formulae: “new” four times (4.3.4-5), four “What I …, I'll …” clauses (8-11), and Malcolm's wary lines,

That which you are my thoughts cannot transpose:
Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell:
Though all things foul would wear the brows of grace,
Yet Grace must still look so.

(21-24)

Unlike earlier iterative language from Macbeth, however, Malcolm's statement distrusting appearances makes
easy sense in context and assumes the continued existence of bright angels and a God of grace.

After a period of little or no repetition during Malcolm's test of Macduff's morality and patriotism (44-137), the latter explains his silent response to the test as bewilderment in the face of “Such welcome and unwelcome things at once” (138). This repetition, unlike the witches' mysterious “fair is foul,” is a reasonable reaction to Malcolm's role-playing. Similarly, the scene ends with repeated understandable expressions of Macduff's emotional disbelief and horror at the murder of his wife and children: four uses of “all” (204-19), several questions about and prayers to “heaven” (207, 223, 227, 231), a few words on what is “manly” (220, 221, 235), and a final couplet, “Receive what cheer you may. / The night is long that never finds the day” (239-40). These reminders of the witches' tune are unambiguous and antithetical in meaning to the thoughts of the sisters or the Macbeths; they either acknowledge painful victimization, suggest faith in a benign providential power, make clear two different human (or male) responses to personal loss, or express hope for amelioration in time. Moreover, the number of these reminders is small, and the length of the scene may render them unheard.

Nevertheless, stylistic elements formerly associated with the house of Macbeth and before that with the witches are, if recognizable, now associated as well with the forces of redemption. Outside Scotland, in a land governed by a king whose supernatural skills, including “a heavenly gift of prophecy” (157), are similar in strength to the witches' powers, the selfsame tune becomes also the manly tune (235). This limited sharing of the weird language may be appropriate at this point in the play, for the prophecies of the apparitions created by the witches in 4.1 suggest the importance of Macduff and imply a kind of natural movement towards Dunsinane which threatens Macbeth. Just as Macbeth and those close to him had a hand in carrying out some of the witches' early prophecies, so Malcolm and Macduff will help bring to pass the prophecies in this late act. All who play out the mandates of time share some of the selfsame verse, however small the amount.

Aside from 5.1, the rest of the last act contains only sporadic sections of iterative formulae. The last eight scenes are so public and so brief, it is clear that Shakespeare is following his previous stylistic pattern.\(^9\) Still, each scene has at least one rhymed couplet, and most close with at least two. Macbeth speaks most of the rhymes, but Siward, the Doctor, Lenox, Macduff, and Malcolm also chime in. Much of the dictional repetition is simply Macbeth's reiteration of the prophecies made by the witches' apparitions. He repeats six times, for example, the prophecy about not fearing a man born of woman (5.3.4, 6; 5.7.3, 11, 13; 5.8.13). Other iterations involve rhetorical resurgence by minor rebels (“Now … Now … Now” and “march we … Meet we … pour we” in 5.2.16-29), Macbeth's calls to “Seyton” (5.3. 19, 20, 29) and to his armorers (5.3.33, 36, 47), and some minor alliterations here and there. Some of this might strike the ears of an attentive audience, but most of it lacks the condensed reiterative intensity found in Lady Macbeth's sleeptalking at the beginning of the act.

The pattern changes in the final scene of the play. As the repetitive tune has been associated with the witches and the Macbeths heretofore, its return in the mouths of those who oppose Macbeth represents in part an ironic suggestion of similarity between the apparently “good” rebels and the evil forces of tyranny. However, as the selfsame tune may also represent the seeds of time, a providential force or a destiny given voice by the witches, its return here in the mouths of the rebels also suggests their status as God's instruments. After some minor repetitive elements are sounded in remarks on Siward's son, Macduff, bearing Macbeth's head on a pole, hails Malcolm as king twice (5.9.20, 25), to which all repeat, “Hail, King of Scotland!” (25), thereby bringing the Weird Sisters' earlier hailing of Macbeth and Banquo, however progressively or ironically or both, to mind. Through this act and its particular language, the play seems to come full circle, with tragic, triumphant, and ironic significance for both past and future kings. Ultimately, Malcolm's closing speech doubles and trebles Macduff's exuberant claim that “the time is free” (21) by promising not to “spend a large expense of time” (26) before repaying his supporters and by assuring everyone that necessary political acts in the new era of earls will be “planted newly with the time” (31), done expeditiously but not unnaturally. Otherwise, says Malcolm, whatever necessity
That calls upon us, by the grace of Grace
We will perform in measure, time, and place.
So thanks to all at once and to each one,
Whom we invite to see us crowned at Scone.

(5.9.37-41)

The repetitive tune (“grace of Grace,” “Grace/place,” “once … one,” “one … Scone”) is couched here in an almost perfect iambic pentameter. Rhyme and repetition now adorn the creation of a monarchy, under God, that promises to operate in an orderly way. The music of Malcolm's invitation, especially its repetitive suggestion of divine oneness at the close of the tragedy, brings the witches' poetry together with its ideational opposite. However apparently antithetical to Scotland's flawed polity and morality and however ironically similar his poetry is to the selfsame tune of witches, earlier regicides, and hellish functionaries, Malcolm's graceful promise resonates also as a celebration of an abstract Christian ideal.

III

This review of the repetitive poetry of Macbeth suggests a number of possibilities for meaning. First, given that the most distinctive poetic repetitions are established by and identified with the witches, the characteristics of the style may have implications for understanding their nature and vice versa. The shape of the style—both repetition per se and its usual form, doublings and triplings—have much in common with some key characteristics of the witches. Second, that the witches' tune is next most powerfully heard in the mouths of the Macbeths and their porter, especially when they are wishful, imaginative, or drunk, may signify the presence of supernatural forces—“Spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts” (1.5.40-41)—in psyches whose reason, God's viceroy, is besieged and weakened. Moreover, the form of the verse seems to have much in common with the character and actions of the infected characters. Third, that the least powerful expression of this repetitive music occurs occasionally in public scenes, especially when religious orthodoxies are invoked, establishes a group in opposition to, though also partly influenced by, the “sightless substances” (1.5.49). Fourth, since all Scotland is touched by the tune and especially since the revenging forces clearly sing it at the end, Shakespeare may be representing through the witches' stylistic signature a power inclusive of but greater than the merely demonic: a fatal or providential force.

First, the witches. While several scholars have tried to pin down precisely which witches Shakespeare copied directly when he wrote Macbeth, it is probable that his Weird Sisters imitate a number of models.\textsuperscript{20} The sisters have been identified exclusively with English or Scottish witches, with Fates or Furies, and even with Scandinavian deities.\textsuperscript{21} In the text, however, Shakespeare's witches are complex: human (petty, lowly hags), supernatural (capable of flight and instant disappearance), transsexual (bearded women), related to demons or fairies (by their familiars), and capable of reading or making fatal predictions (the seeds of time). That the witches are complex and mysterious accords with Shakespeare's treatment of the supernatural in other tragedies, which seldom allow for supernatural certainties.

In Renaissance England and the Jacobean court, furthermore, the reality of witches was not a foregone conclusion. Reginald Scot's The Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584) had exposed the superstitions involved, though King James's Daemonologie (1597) lent some credence to the facticity of witchcraft. But even the monarch's position in this matter is not perfectly clear. While his earlier personal involvement in the North Berwick case (held to be a plot by witches against his life while king of Scotland) may have strengthened his belief in witches, his later investigations as king of England exhibit growing skepticism on the question.\textsuperscript{22} Thus, ambiguity about the nature of the witches pervades both historical and dramatic contexts.

I believe that the witches' diverse, conglomerate nature and mystery is represented aurally by their tune, with its chant-like jangle of several special rhythms and repetitive formulae. But the main characteristics of the
tune may help define, not merely reflect, what the witches are. The essence of the tune is repetition, which is often associated, of course, with childish and regressive character and action. Children take pleasure in doing something over and over, seeking immediate gratification without the burden of a memory that might find constant iteration uninteresting or fruitless. Moreover, as noted earlier, regressive repetition is compulsive, driven by instinctual needs. Macbeth's need for security leads to compulsive plotting and killing, for example. Thus, the tune suggests that those who spur Macbeth on are elemental beings who can infiltrate the unconscious minds of others.

Furthermore, repetition is also associated with the unthinking certainty of the habitual and the routine; through repetitive acts, for example, a child seeks a kind of secure autonomy in an uncertain world. Warriors, like today's athletes, also thrive on "second-nature" actions developed by repeated drill. Success in single battle comes by doing without thinking, as in Macbeth's unseaming of Macdonwald without courtesies (1.2.16-23). Finally, repetition partakes of the child's fantasy of timelessness, of never-ending returns that never change, a fantasy both Macbeths briefly share (1.5.54-58 and 1.7.1-7) and one that the witches live out as supernatural creatures. So the selfsame tune associates the witches with the psychological states of the characters they bedevil.

Beyond the consistent fact of repetition itself, the number of repetitions in rhymes, diction, alliteration, and so forth is remarkably consistent in all examples of the selfsame tune. As noted before, most repetitions are doublings and triplings of various formal elements. The multiples themselves are suggestive. The doubling may underscore the witches' ability to confuse, to conflate appearance and reality. As noted earlier, from a Christian perspective, the witches may be seen as confusing God's ways by means of chaotic antitheses and ambiguities, thus motivating human actions destructive of the cosmos, the created order. Macbeth clearly acknowledges this aspect of the sisters' being when, faced with the unexpected truth of Macduff's Caesarian birth, he tells himself in frustration, "And be these juggling fiends no more believ'd, / That palter with us in a double sense" (5.8.19-20). That is, poetic doublings reinforce the duplicitous semantics of the witches. Triplings, on the other hand, have a positive Christian association with the Triune God. But the number three has also been related to witchcraft and demonology. Dante's Satan, for example, is given three faces in one head, an obvious parody of the Trinity. Medieval sorcerers and necromancers, moreover, have always shown a predilection for odd numbers, particularly for three, as have, according to superstition, English witches.

Of equal importance is the fact that three is the number of several classical figures with whom the Weird Sisters are associated in Elizabethan demonology (and in the text of the play). Hecate, for example, is a triple goddess in classical mythology, not merely the queen of night, ghosts, magic, and witches; she is a deity "supreme in Heaven, on earth, and in Tartarus," who, though a Titan, joined the Olympians, was exalted by Zeus, became an intercessor for human prayers, and served as a benefactress in politics, war, sport, fishing, and farming. That Shakespeare understood her triune being is suggested by Puck's claim that fairies run "By the triple Hecate's team / From the presence of the sun" (A Midsummer Night's Dream 5.1.370-71) and by Lucianus's statement, in the Mousetrap, that his drug "With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected / Thy natural magic and dire property / On wholesome life usurps immediately" (Hamlet 3.2.40-44). Macbeth's allusions to Hecate (2.2.49-56 and 3.2.40-44) explicitly associate her with witchcraft and murder, but nothing in her relationship to the three sisters and their verbal triplicities precludes her classical identification as well.

What I am trying to suggest is that the number three, as it applies to the witches, is not merely a diabolical parody but perhaps also a sign of more positive, or at least neutral, elemental and universal power. When we see what the witches' words do to Macbeth's conscience, we think of the painful but ultimately just Furies, of Hecate in hell. But we may think as well of the classical Fates, also a threesome and the final arbiters of all life. In Hesiod, the Moirae are the daughters of Zeus's union with Themis (law) and are signs of order like her other progeny, "the Hours—Good Order, Justice, and prosperous Peace." Shakespeare's intention that these associations be recognized is implied by the fact that the initially ambiguous predictions of his Weird Sisters are fully worked out in the text and reinforced contextually for a Jacobean audience by the life of James I and
knowledge of his ancestry. Indeed, Holinshed calls the sisters “goddesses of destiny,” and it is possible that Shakespeare was with King James at Oxford in 1605 when Gwinn's Tres Sibyllae, a play in which three fates prophesy that Banquo's descendants will hold power for eternity, was performed for the monarch. Finally, Shakespeare turned to the classics, to Ovid's story of Medea (where she is a sorceress of Hecate throughout) to develop his prophecy scene in act 4. English and Scottish witches apparently did not use cauldrons, but Medea and the Weird Sisters do. Moreover, in Golding's Ovid, all of Medea's rituals, and there are many of them, are done three times.

The selfsame tune, then, in the syncretic, copious manner of Renaissance humanist writings, is appropriate to witches who are multifaceted creatures, synthetic of several traditions. Though the Weird Sisters are, by their destructive, revengeful designs and ambiguous sexuality, largely representations of “unnatural” evil, they are also part of Nature's plan, of the cosmic destiny. Like the devils who ultimately work for God, witches are part of a postlapsarian but still providential universe. Indeed, James's Daemonologie explicitly states that Scottish witches could be used by God to punish the wicked: witches work for the devil, and “where the devil's intention in them is euer to perish, either the soule or the body … God, by the contrarie, draws euer out of that evill glorye to himselfe.” Almost all Renaissance writings on witchcraft support the view that God's will allows the opportunity for demonic activity; to disagree would be to rejuvenate the Manichean heresy. Thus, however apparently antagonistic to God's order, the verbal patterns of the three sisters ultimately suggest a divine origin or fated plan. By the end of the play, it is apparent that the witches can read the “seeds of time” (1.3.58), the order of things, and possibly the blueprint drawn by that Christian fate or fury called Providence.

But why do vestiges of these poetic patterns show up in the minds of other characters? The conventional answer, as noted earlier, is that the Weird Sisters, like demons or Furies, penetrate the bodies and minds of those they mean to destroy; the verbal patterns are evidence of demonic possession and/or furious conscience. This could happen in two ways. First, the witches may be thought of as pawns of devils who, according to medieval demonology, take demonic possession of our bodies through our minds. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking has been called “demoniacal somnambulism.” Perhaps her sleep-talking is a sign of the mental gateway for this possession. A variant to this demonological explanation has the witches themselves capable of mental unrest. Scottish witches could apparently vanish, travel through the air, and give us nightmares; if so, the witches' tune could be implanted without demonic inhabitation. Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's pangs of conscience could be seen merely as the result of harassment by the witches, acting like tormenting Furies.

But the conventional reading is only part of the story. Shakespeare makes clear that the witches' words come to Macbeth before he meets them directly, and characters like the Porter, only tangential to any diabolical plot, or like Malcolm at the end, also sing the tune. Throughout the play, Shakespeare keeps the origin of the pattern a mystery, allowing an audience to think the repetitious language bubbled up independently in several minds. Thus, the pattern represents a power related to but sometimes independent of its manifestation in the witches. The verbal repetitions of three and two (and two doubled, or four) are a medium of cosmic design, manifestations of mysterious universal forces; their classical associations noted above lend support to this broader interpretation.

If the patterns represent cosmic forces at work both in the world and the minds of the characters, thereby adumbrating the play's repeated correspondence of macro- and microcosm, a correspondence at the center of the well-known cosmology of the previous age, there may be yet another way to look at the doublings and triplings in Macbeth. Shakespeare may have been trying to tap the occult numerological resources of his times, whether or not he believed in them or in the analogic providential system they usually supported. As others have shown, to do so would not be unusual for a poet or playwright; Spenser often alluded to classical and medieval numerological systems in his poetry, and the architecture and decoration of the Renaissance theater itself may have expressed occult numerological signification. Numerological systems, furthermore, are often integral to traditions of white magic, traditions of which Shakespeare, in The Winter's Tale, The
Tempest, and here in the figure of Edward the Confessor, shows some understanding. Though Macbeth is concerned largely with what, at first glance, is black magic, distinctions between the two were often blurred in the Renaissance. The occultist Cornelius Agrippa, for example, was a white magus to some, though to others, including Marlowe’s Faustus, he was a black conjurer (Dr. Faustus 1.1.111-19). And many of Prospero's theurgic activities are indistinct from the actions of a witch or conjuror. Both the magus and the witch tried to take advantage of occult forces hidden in nature. As many incantatory conjurations imply, that control often involved the use of magic numbers.

Since many in the Renaissance questioned the inherited medieval cosmology, however, it is unlikely that the numerological tradition related to it was simplemindedly accepted either. Shakespeare’s ironic handling of the Great Chain of Being in Troilus and Cressida or his questioning of providential politics in the Lancastrian tetralogy is undeniable. Therefore, I doubt very much that Shakespeare was an occultist in the tradition of someone like John Dee or Agrippa. But since Macbeth offers palpable witches as well as clear descriptions (e.g., 2.4.1-30) of the medieval cosmology once overrated by E. M. W. Tillyard and now out of critical fashion, it seems inescapable that Shakespeare knew something of the occult and its numerology. Many of his sources and analogues (such as Plutarch, St. Augustine, du Bartas, and Primaudaye) refer to magic numbers on occasion, and Shakespeare clearly knows something of Pythagoras, the father of numerology. Though Shakespeare’s direct references to this ancient philosopher involve the transmigration of souls, not the theory of numbers (see Merchant of Venice 4.1.131 and Twelfth Night 4.2.50, 58), Rosalind associates Pythagoras with excessive rhyming in As You Like It (3.2.176-78), and the Pythagorean idea of the music of the spheres, through Scipio and Macrobius, inhabits the end of The Merchant of Venice (5.1.54-88). The selfsame tune may not represent our idea of celestial sounds, but it is full of poetic music.

The celestial music, of course, is integral to Pythagoras’s founding belief that numbers express the principles or laws of the universe and the souls of men. Platonists were impressed by number too; being more formal, more like Plato’s Forms, number was believed closer to ultimate reality than physical data; in the Timaeus, number determines the shape and order of creation. The idea that numbers were the reality behind or within the cosmos was the basic principle of numerologists from the Gnostics and Cabalists to the Renaissance, where Platonists, occultists, and poets continued to reflect the view. It is likely, then, that Shakespeare knew something of this belief and that the witches' tune in Macbeth is a reflection of the musica mundana, the numbers of time. Indeed, Shakespeare may have been thinking of St. Augustine’s reprise of the Book of Wisdom in The City of God—“Thou hast ordered all things in measure, and number, and weight”—when he wrote Malcolm’s final speech.

By the time of the Renaissance, of course, numerological systems were very complicated and self-contradictory; many meanings for many numbers made systematic claims impossible. But almost all systems shared certain key numbers: 1 through 10 and some of their multiples. Concerning the cosmos, the important numbers were 2, 3, and 4. These derive from the well-known Pythagorean tetraktys, or tetrad, believed to be the archetypal foundation of the universe. One, the monad, a point identified with God, extends itself to a universe of 2, the dyad, a line that divides all into contraries (light/darkness, good/evil, male/female, etc.) and 3, the triad, a two-dimensional surface area that supposedly reconciles the opposites. Two and 3 represent in themselves the famous cosmological principle of discordia concors, a harmony of conflicting opposites. Taken together, moreover, 2 and 3 are the harmonic middle that yokes the spiritual (1) with the material (4) in the cosmos. Four, the tetrad, a geometrical solid expressing volume, is an appropriate number for matter. It is consistent with the four elements of the cosmos and the timing of physical change on earth: the four seasons.

Adding these numbers up yields the Pythagorean perfection of 10, the decad, suggesting that the universe, one turned into many, or God’s created world, is harmonious. Pythagoras assumed this harmony in his description of the diapasons of music, of which the numbers 1 through 4 were the foundational tuning system. This musica humana was, of course, a reflection of the music of the spheres, cosmic lubricant for the Ptolemaic
geocentric spheres which were presumed to be in perpetual motion. Likewise, the tetrad was applied to man as microcosm (e.g., child, youth, adult, elder) and later to man's soul (e.g., the four humors). Finally, for the Pythagoreans, man's creations were evidence of his essence as number: mimetic art was “a persuasive demonstration that our lives are patterned according to number, weight, and measure—according to the same dimensions as the universe.”⁴¹ Therefore, despite growing empiricism and skepticism toward medieval cosmology in the early modern era, Shakespeare may have been alluding in the witches' selfsame tune to the ancient but still extant universal connections of Pythagorean numerology.

Beyond the symbolic possibilities found in stylistic repetition alone, then, the numbers of repetitions (doublings, triplings, and quadruplings) in the largely tetrameter lines of the witches and elsewhere may bring a mysterious cosmic dimension to the tragedy of Macbeth. As noted above, Pythagorean lore considered 2 and 3 the numbers by which the supernatural inhabited the material. But even more specific numerological associations are possible as well. The Renaissance found more than cosmological significance in 2 and 3, though complication and inconsistency prevent a precise reading. Two, for example, is usually considered a negative number but also has many positive and neutral associations. Cornelius Agrippa claims that two “signifies knowledge, memory, light, man (the microcosm), charity, wedding, and society,” and he also notes that there were two testaments, two tables of law, two first parents, two large planets (moon and sun), and two rational creatures (angels and humans), among other dyads.⁴² In general, however, 2 is associated less positively; as noted above, its symbolic essence is division, an evil, since 2 prevents the perfect unity of 1, the divine. Thus, Agrippa also includes as equivalences man's capacity to choose evil instead of good, the two sexes, “discord and confusion (division again), misfortune, impurity, and matter.”⁴³ This is how Spenser sees things in book 1 of The Faerie Queene: Duessa, who is grossly physical, duplicitous, and discordant, is contrasted to the true faith, Una. Two is, essentially, the number of the lower, non-divine part of standard human pairings: the body as opposed to the soul, the willful imagination versus reason, and the female sex (often held incapable of reason).

Three, on the other hand, is usually associated more positively. First, as noted earlier, there are the number's obvious trinitarian overtones and use as diabolic parody. But equally important is the number's status in the classical tradition; as noted above, 3 unites what 2 divides, brings 1 (spirit) and 2 (matter) together, and thus is the number of harmony, of marriage (generative love), of the world perfected, and of the masculine (both passionate and rational) gender. Alistair Fowler describes the triad as the highest human and earthly perfection possible and relates the number to the Garden of Adonis in book 3 of The Faerie Queene.⁴⁴ However clouded by implicit ambiguities and vaguities, then, these numerological associations suggest what several in Shakespeare's audience may have understood about the pervasive, repetitive dyadic and triadic verbal structures analyzed in this essay. First, the fact that the pattern involves two numbers which are, in a sense, symbolic opposites, not to mention the fact that one of them is the number of division and confusion, reinforces the ambiguity of the play. Conversely, the fact that the verse repeats, for the most part, two numerical patterns (disregarding the much less numerous fourfold patterns or considering them doublings of twofold ones), coupled with the fact that one of those two patterns usually represents divinity and a beneficent force which contains the discordant other, suggests that however ambiguous the world of the play, an invisible order still operates. The selfsame tune implies, then, both actual cosmic discord and potential harmony, or suggests that the fatal or providential forces operative in the cosmos include both divisive and harmonic power. (Of course, the presence of these powers is suggested to us without cognitive certainty, without being simplistically untrue to life, in which the divine is only mysteriously intimated if at all. Shakespeare holds the mirror up to nature in more than one sense here.) Most importantly, the numbers chosen for adumbration are numerologically appropriate to basic issues in Macbeth: cosmic, natural, and social discord or harmony, sex and marriage, and the relationship of imagination and reason, among others.

As speech, of course, the witches' tune also reflects division in the souls of its speakers; given the analogical perspectives possible in the Renaissance, one would expect this microcosmic split to accompany macrocosmic
dissard. In this regard, it is especially suggestive to think in terms of medieval and Renaissance faculty psychology, since the structure of man's soul in most versions of that scheme is so obviously triadic and dyadic. The soul is held to be tripartite, as in Plato, while each of the higher parts (the sensitive and the intellectual) is split into two powers (apprehension and motion), themselves divisible into three parts (e.g., the apprehending part of the sensitive soul has three internal senses, and the same part of the intellectual soul includes intellect, reason, and understanding). Thus in Macbeth when the incantatory and regressive patterns, often mixed with equivocal, ambiguous signification, appear in the minds of the hero and heroine, a divisive imbalance in the faculty psychology of both may be implied. In the Macbeths, the masculine and feminine are not harmonized, a divisive rather than generative path to the crown is chosen, and the lesser imaginative and willful faculties in each “Outrun the pauser, reason” (2.3.109), which should rule. The most obvious instances of the witches' tune in the mouths of various characters, moreover, come in times of private agitation, when the imagination, that faculty so tricky yet so capable of strange constancy (A Midsummer Night's Dream 5.1.1-27), is relatively unfettered by reason. The imagination, of course, was held to be the avenue by which the devil and the witches attacked their prey. In conclusion, I note that the largest repositories of the selfsame tune—Macbeth's and his wife's soliloquies, the Porter's inebriated remarks, and Lady Macbeth's sleep-talking—are in part manifestations of the characters' imaginations. Moreover, they have as little indebtedness to Shakespeare's known sources as any lines in the play: they are all inventions of the dramatist himself.

While numerological criticism must remain largely speculative, especially in drama, where unlike in poetry, the conviction of an argument based on ingenious and exact line counting (as in Spenser's Epithalamion) is impossible, the heavy repetition that the basic numbers receive and the appropriate connections they have to the themes, characters, and atmosphere of this play make it difficult to dismiss numerology as a signifier in Macbeth. This is especially the case because the architecture of the text and the historical context of its writing also support the play's repeated stylistic forms. First, the characters seem to be grouped appropriately: Macbeth is full of families of two and three. Though other plays share this feature (such as King Lear and the romantic comedies), audiences may notice the groups more in Macbeth. Simon Forman, the astrologer, alchemist, and inveterate playgoer, calls attention in his Book of Plaies and Notes to the fact that “2 noblemen” meet “3 women fairies” who hail him “3 tymes” in the opening of the Globe's 1611 production. Furthermore, at least one modern critic has shown that the structure of the play is dyadic and triadic. Indeed, dramatic actions are frequently repeated according to the pattern. For example, Macbeth's meeting with the witches is fully described three times: once dramatically, once in a letter, and once in conversation. Or the opening battle is won twice in the field and a third time at Cawdor's death. Or Rosse tells Macduff about his wife twice, and the latter's grief is expressed in three apparently disbelieving questions. Or Macbeth is defeated in action by two noble sons (Malcolm and Macduff) and in lineage by a third (Fleance). Additionally, the play offers strange twosomes and threesomes, like the waiting woman and doctor who watch Lady Macbeth sleepwalk, or (in language only) the “two or three” (4.1.141) Lenox says reported Macduff's flight to England. Finally, there are the two, then inexplicably three murderers, who meet Macbeth on stage for a second and third time, who are not numbered by Holinshed but who have no identity except number in Shakespeare. Perhaps, then, it is the number, not the identity, of the third murderer that Shakespeare wanted to emphasize, purposely leaving the name a mystery.

Beyond the text, we must think of James I. As previously noted, Macbeth may have been written for a first performance before the king. At the very least, it contains matters of some interest to the monarch: the witchcraft issue on which he wrote, questions of political usurpation and divine intervention in royal affairs, the “equivocation” material relating to the recent plot on his life, the presentation of an analogous earlier moment of unity between England and Scotland, and parallels to the so-called Gowrie conspiracy against James in the late sixteenth century. Kernan thinks that James may have set up the Gowries with a false story as part of a family revenge; the king clearly made political hay by celebrating its anniversary as Gowrie Day. Whether the story was mythical or not, however, the “murder of Duncan by Macbeth is presented in such a way as to evoke profound memory of the near murder of James by the Gowries. James' deliverance
was acutely significant, indeed providentially confirming, because it represented the king's second escape—and very possibly even his third escape—from the treacherous designs of the House of Gowrie.”

Interestingly as well, some contemporaries believed that the earl of Gowrie was a cabalist and associate of necromancers.

The clearest link between Macbeth and Shakespeare's royal patron, however, is the Stuart genealogy represented by the show of Banquo and the eight kings (eight or nine figures, triple and double multiples respectively of 2 and 3) during Macbeth's last meeting with the witches. During this show, Shakespeare has Macbeth react with horror not only to a mirror picturing generations beyond the last king, but also to the “two-fold balls and treble sceptres” (4.1.121) some of those future monarchs carry. Within the drama, these symbols of royalty and sexual potency help stir Macbeth to revenge his impotence, his “barren sceptre” (3.1.60-63), by the murder of Macduff's wife and children. In addition, the balls and scepters might also have been symbolic outside the drama. Many in the Jacobean audience might have seen a direct reference to James and his several coronations. The twofold balls may have reminded the audience of orbs symbolic of James's double coronation (England and Scotland), while the treble scepters may have been interpreted as the two staffs used for investment in the English coronation at Westminster and the one staff used at Scone.

Alternatively, the balls may represent the unity of the crowns of Scotland and England, while the scepters represent the union, in theory, of England, France, and Ireland under James. In either case, the reference, and by implication the verbal patterns of the same number, relate to the reigning monarch, perhaps reinforcing the mysterious providential identification which the verbal pattern possesses. Both in Shakespeare's play and in the minds of its first audiences, then, the selfsame tune of repetitive doubles and triples may intimate the existence of universal design amid cosmic, political, and psychological chaos.

IV

Both late New Critical and postmodern analyses of Macbeth have, in the last two decades, considerably altered how scholars of the early modern era understand the play. From A. C. Bradley on, humanist and formalist critics writing in the first sixty years of the twentieth century generally saw the tragedy as a relatively clear and simple study of the human capacity for and retributive consequences of moral evil. Macbeth and his wife, though influenced by the witches' prophecies, voluntarily choose to commit an immoral and criminal act for which they justly, though not unsympathetically, pay a psychological and political price. Several historical critics, then and now, have buttressed this interpretation by making the case that Shakespeare wrote the play in support of the king and his policies. To the contrary, relatively recent formalist and historicist studies have argued for increased recognition of the play's ambiguity and complexity. Furthermore, what earlier critics saw in the last acts of Macbeth as a progressive cleansing of Scotland by its victimized good sons, Malcolm and Macduff, has more recently been interpreted as a cyclical return of violent, patriarchal, and oppressive figures who are not likely to be any better than Macbeth. The cause of strife, that is, may be found in the political hierarchy and patriarchal culture of Scotland. Indeed, several leading critics claim that the witches are heroines who successfully subvert a pack of male oppressors. While a few recent scholars incorporate but ultimately reject these postmodernist trends, and while both the underpinnings and the appropriateness of recent critical judgments about Renaissance literature have been heatedly challenged, the new readings dominate critical discourse on Macbeth today.

In this critical context, what the selfsame tune of supernatural soliciting suggests is that Macbeth presents us with a paradoxical world that is both demonically cyclical and progressively orthodox in its design. The play is neither a simple expression of crime and punishment reflective of James's (or Tillyard's) biases nor a play as ambiguously dark and nihilistic as King Lear. Rather, the repetitive (possibly numerological) verbal patterns in Macbeth represent, in such a manner that divine will always remains a mystery, the existence of a supernatural order in which possible but indeterminate providential designs work through demonic and human actors to bring changes to the history of Scotland and England. Likewise, while there are no outright heroes in the bellicose society of the play, and almost all characters, largely blind to the patriarchal ideology and the
cycle of revenge they enact, bear some responsibility for the bloody gore in Scotland, yet those who oppose the Macbeths are still distinguishable as better characters—morally, psychologically, and politically. Therefore, while the inscrutable and subversively cyclical forces so dear to recent criticism are clearly inscribed in the verbal patterns I have analyzed, the repetitive style in Macbeth also strongly suggests the existence of some kind of fated progressive order beyond the fog and filthy air. Indeed, the selfsame tune shows how deeply embedded in the text of the play is the universal “chaosmos,” the *discordia concors* of destructive repetition and providential creation. In Macbeth, there are furious sounds that signify something, a vision paradoxically diabolical and divine.\(^6\)

**Notes**

2. George Walton Williams, “‘Time for such a word’: Verbal Echoing in Macbeth,” *Shakespeare Survey* 47 (1994): 153-59, is the most recent of many to make this point.
3. Williams notes the repetition of Macbeth’s “fair and foul,” the king and queen’s “hereafter,” and Banquo’s “fear and fair,” suggesting that these dictional echoes show how the characters succumb unconsciously to the witches’ evil (“Verbal Echoing,” 153-59). His limited focus on so few repeated words spread over several acts, however, raises questions about audience recognition of the patterns. Repeated diction, moreover, can be found in any play and does little to highlight the distinctive quality of Macbeth. Finding only evil in the play’s many echoes also seems unnecessarily limiting. By contrast, Madeleine Doran’s “The Macbeth Music,” *Shakespeare Studies* 16 (1983): 153-73, sees the play as a musical composition involving a number of “patterns of recurrence,” including theme, voice, diction, alliteration, assonance, paronomasia, rhyme, and isocon. However, except to see this “music” as a vague circulation of moral ambiguity, Doran does little to analyze the style in detail.
7. Many readers find the style of the play distinctive. I have discovered occasional sections of other Shakespearean dramas with similar doubling or tripling repetition, especially in *Hamlet*, but these plays have much less of the characteristic style overall, many fewer heavy concentrations of it, fewer repetitions per speech in those concentrations, and no lines that call attention to the verse at the start.
13. Because textual scholars believe that 4.1.39-43 and 125-32, along with 3.5.1-35, were written either by Thomas Middleton or an anonymous dramatist, I have not included them in my analysis of poetic
patterns in the play. Hecate, who is prominently featured in these sections, largely speaks quite regular iambic tetrameter, a verse form seldom used by the Weird Sisters. Her poetry and that of 1 Witch in 4.1.125-32 shows none of the verbal repetition characteristic of the witches, the apparitions, Macbeth, or other characters who seem to chant the selfsame tune. Nevertheless, if Shakespeare or a close collaborator did pen these suspect passages, a case could be made for the appropriateness of their form. The tetrameter couplets, for example, could be linked to the witches' speech elsewhere, and the iambic meter could be construed as a way to distinguish and elevate Hecate. Furthermore, the structure of the lines shows signs of characteristic repetition. Hecate's tetrameters in 3.5, for example, are framed at the beginning and the end by a set of three irregular pentameter lines consisting of a witch's unrhymed line and a couplet by the triple goddess herself (1-3 and 34-36). Likewise, the apparent interpolations in 4.1 frame, in tetrameter couplets, the witches' visionary shows, another structural repetition. Finally, both Hecate's appearances and the words of 1 Witch are followed by music (see the Folio SD at 3.5.33 and the hints of music and dance in 4.1), the first two including songs which, according to late seventeenth-century versions of the play, come from Middleton's The Witch. Could these musical interludes symbolically suggest that the divine Hecate is related to the music of the spheres, in which was inscribed the plan of the universe? Could the poetic framings suggest by their containment a similar classical and medieval orthodoxy?

15. See Huston Diehl, “Horrid Image, Sorry Sight, Fatal Vision: The Visual Rhetoric of Macbeth,” Shakespeare Studies 16 (1983): 191-203, for the view that Macbeth fails morally because he creates but does not understand the images that seduce and haunt him. See also Arnold Stein, “Macbeth and Word-Magic,” Sewanee Review 59 (1951): 271-84, for the idea that Macbeth falls on account of his self-conscious verbal magic, powers he uses on and for himself alone. My own opinion is that Macbeth's use of language is as much out of his conscious control as in it, and that the rush of his poetry motivates his actions as much as the images his imagination generates.
16. These closing lines and the earlier ones of Rosse and Duncan in 1.2 can be related, of course, to Shakespeare's well-known habit of ending scenes with couplets. But interestingly, Macbeth is second only to Richard II among the tragedies for the number of couplets that close its scenes; given its relative brevity, Macbeth is unusually full of these closing rhymes, particularly when compared to other late tragedies. Beyond following convention, why else does the Bard rhyme so much in this play? The question will never be answered definitively, but this increase in the play's repetition of sounds is probably not unrelated to the verbal music I have taken pains to describe. The selfsame tune may be the answer, and the affinity with Richard II may be instructive. Both plays are hierarchical tragedies involving regicide, and both give ample space to expressions of belief in a providential, hierarchical, and correspondent worldview while never endorsing that belief system overtly.
18. See Frederic B. Tromly, “Macbeth and His Porter,” Shakespeare Quarterly 26 (1975): 151-56, who contends that “the Porter describes the power of drink in terms which suggest demoniacal possession” (155), a state closely associated with Renaissance witchcraft and one that Lady Macbeth (1.5.40-54) and her husband (3.2.46-53) try to will for themselves.
19. Scenes in the fifth act average 35 lines each, about half the length of scenes in act 1, the next shortest group, and less than one-third the average length of all scenes.


31. W. C. Curry, *Shakespeare’s Philosophical Patterns* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1939), 86-87. Also, see Harris, *Night’s Black Agents*, 53-54, who suggests that Lady Macbeth is possessed by a demonic nightmare and that her husband's insomnia and Donalbain's dream show the demon present throughout. Wills, *Witches and Jesuits*, 51-74, goes even further; he thinks Macbeth himself is a male witch.


43. Ibid.

44. Fowler, *Numbers of Time*, 18-23.

45. Faculty psychology is a hodgepodge of slightly different constructions, but its Aristotelian and ultimately Thomist fundamentals can be discerned in such texts as Bright's *Treatise on Melancholy* (1586), Davies's *Nosce Teipsum* (1599), the English translation of Primaduyaye's *The French Academy* (1600), and Wright's *The Passions of the minde in general* (1604). See Ruth L. Anderson, *Elizabethan

47. Forman, quoted in Muir's introduction to Macbeth, xiii-xiv.


50. This quizzical double disclosure (first a lie, then a terrible truth about the murder of Lady Macduff and her children) was brought to my attention by Professor Joyce East of West Virginia State College.

51. Kernan, King's Playwright, 40-41 and 60.


53. Ibid., 202.

54. See Muir's note to 4.1.121 in his edition of Macbeth.


59. Another formalist, Berger, “Early Scenes,” contends that the shape of the play is ironic, that Cawdor, Macbeth, Macduff, and Malcolm are all rebels and/or regicides, and that the early scenes suggest how competitive warrior values assumed by all the characters render unsatisfactory simple moral distinctions between them. Moreover, Booth, “King Lear,” believes that Shakespeare manipulates theatrical experience to work against an audience's acceptance of the so-called good characters in Macbeth. Foster, “War on Time,” thinks Malcolm and Macduff are clearly part of a cycle of repeated revenge and disorder. Jonathan Goldberg, “Macbeth and Source,” in Poststructuralist Readings of English Poetry, ed. Richard Machen and Christopher Norris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 38-58, arguing from deconstructive principles about the limited hegemony of dominant discourses, says Shakespeare did not make his characters overtly good or evil; Malcolm and Macduff
resemble Macbeth more than they differ from him. Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays* (London: Routledge, 1992), attributes the cause of all inhumanity and destruction in *Macbeth* to the play’s absolutist fantasy of escape from female origins and power, a patriarchal wish of which Macbeth is the exemplar but to which Malcolm and Macduff are ambiguously or tangentially related.

60. Karen s. Coddon, “‘Unreal Mockery’: Unreason and the Problem of Spectacle in *Macbeth,*” *ELH* 56 (1989): 485-501, in a New Historical postmodern analysis, goes even further by suggesting that Macbeth should not be considered an individual person but, rather, the product of a social disorder reflective of the precarious political foundations of Jacobean England.

61. Goldberg, “*Macbeth* and Source,” says the witches represent the “heterogeneity of uncontrolled duplication” and successfully subvert fantasies of dominance in the “hypermasculine world” of the play. Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), believes the witches are culturally marginalized heroines who expose the foulness of an oppressive social hierarchy that blindly considers itself fair and just.


64. See James L. Calderwood, *If It Were Done: “Macbeth” and Tragic Action* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), for a balanced view of the play. Calderwood believes that the structure of *Macbeth* is both progressively linear and cyclical, sees in its repetitions both barren augmentation and procreative increase, and finds that negative judgments of Malcolm and Macduff, while serious, do not obliterate the rightness of their actions at the end.

65. Without a sense of the full power of the ambiguous cosmological forces represented in the “selfsame tune” of witches and Scots, in conjunction of course with an understanding of the hero’s violent warrior values, patriarchal insecurities, and individual psychological idiosyncracy, audiences are unlikely to identify with or feel pity for Macbeth, thus forestalling the kind of catharsis that Shakespeare’s other great tragedies inspire. I believe that these paradoxical universal forces are part of the *hamartia* of the play; they must be felt in the poetry, or Macbeth’s tragic plight will not be fully experienced. Perhaps rhetorical and linguistic insensitivity on the part of contemporary directors, actors, and audiences is the reason why, as Professor Lois Potter of the University of Delaware recently told me, productions of *Macbeth* seldom, if ever, achieve the tragic feeling of *Hamlet, Othello,* and *King Lear.*

**Macbeth (Vol. 90): Further Reading**

**CRITICISM**

Presents an in-depth critical introduction to Macbeth, emphasizing the play's historical sources, major themes, language, and performance history.


Locates Macbeth within its Jacobean cultural context, linking the tragedy thematically to a number of contemporary discourses on such issues as Scottish history, sovereignty, rebellion, and witchcraft.


Argues that Macbeth represents a confluence of the vividly intense, almost believable, theatrical experience with the emerging proclivity for skepticism which shaped the cultural attitudes of Jacobean playgoers.


Maintains that any study of the sources used in the writing of Macbeth must acknowledge their differing social and political bases.


Suggests that Jean Racine's Phèdre and Shakespeare's Macbeth anticipate modern fatalism.


Asserts that Macbeth features some conventions of the chivalric romance tradition, particularly emphasizing the romantic “return-from-exile” motif inherent in Malcolm's triumph over Macbeth.


Maintains that Shakespeare demonstrated the limitations of the tragic mode in Macbeth.


Attempts to reconstruct a 1611 performance of Macbeth based on a detailed eye-witness account from a spectator named Simon Forman. The critic speculates that the performance Forman witnessed might have been based on a lost quarto version of the play that predates the 1623 Folio edition.


Suggests that a royal performance of Macbeth was staged in 1606 for James I and his brother-in-law, King Christian of Denmark. The critic maintains that the production would have been “a consummate piece of patronage art” which celebrated James's sovereignty and underscored his opposition to the politically and culturally destabilizing influence of witchcraft.

*Provides a neuroscientific assessment of the sensory response to live drama, demonstrating how brain synapses process theatrical words and images from a play in performance. The critic applies this cognitive principle to “the cultural moment” when Macbeth was likely first performed in 1606, arguing that each auditor's response did not conform to any unified ideological criteria but rather produced infinite unpredictable and indeterminate meanings.*


*Presents a favorable review of Yukio Ninagawa's production of Macbeth.*


*Discusses Shakespeare's characterization of Lady Macbeth in terms of contemporary thought regarding motherhood, witchcraft, and hysteria.*


*Examines the popularity of villainous characters in Macbeth and several other Jacobean plays.*


*Calls Yukio Ninagawa's production of Macbeth “gaudily stylish but undeniably exciting.”*


*Recommends a dynamic strategy for teaching Macbeth.*

### Critical Essays: Time for Such a Word - Verbal Echoing in Macbeth

*Time for Such a Word' Verbal Echoing in *Macbeth*

**George Walton Williams, Duke University**

It is a critical commonplace that Macbeth's opening line—'So foul and fair a day I have not seen' (1.3.36), whatever its particular referents may be—is singularly important to Macbeth's character, echoing as it does the enigmatic and ominous chant of the Witches as they conclude their first appearance: 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (1.1.10). That the play begins with the witches strikingly adumbrates their immanent presence throughout the play; that they are the first to mention the name of the hero confirms their importance. The play and the character both will live under the shadow and the menace of these opening lines—the shortest first scene in the canon. The scene includes this gnomic utterance that destroys 'the distinction [between] ... foul and fair'; with it the Witches verbalize their position, standing for 'those who have said "Evil, be thou my good."' Their contrasting adjectives occur often in proverbial contexts in English, but the paradox here suggested is unusual, though not unique, in the tradition.3 'Fair without but foul within', says the proverb; the Witches say that fairness and foulness are the same, a point that Shakespeare had expressed with
extraordinary foreshadowing in *Love's Labour's Lost*: "Fair" in "all hail" is foul, as I conceive' (5.2.340).

By repeating the adjectives and reversing their sequence in the second half of the Witches' line, Shakespeare calls particular attention to these words, invests them with mystery, and fixes them in our minds so that when Macbeth speaks them just over one hundred lines later, his echo of the Witches' diction comes in with an eerie, secondary force (independently of the speaker's presumed intention). Macbeth intends, presumably, little more than a reference to a mixed sort of day—the uncertain tide of the battle, the dubious nature of the weather—but his use of the Witches’ terms, linking the Witches and the speaker in vocabulary, intimates that there is a bond between them and him, more significant than mere repetition of diction. He is ready to receive them when they come to him. Macbeth did not hear the Witches, but he knows how they speak and so knows how they think; speaking their words, he speaks their thoughts.

A comparable echoing of a word not heard occurs in Scene 5 of the first Act, as Lady Macbeth reads and re-acts to her husband's letter. That letter brings her the sense and the spirit of the encounter with the Witches and gives Lady Macbeth some seven words of their vocabulary five that she repeats, commenting to herself—'Cawdor', 'shalt be', 'promised', 'great[ness]', 'mortal'—and two others that she addresses to Macbeth—'all-hail', 'ignorant' (1.5.14-56). Three of these words appear together at the end of Macbeth's letter: 'that thou … [mightst not be] ignorant of what greatness is promised thee' (11-13; emphasis mine). The three words spring from love; Macbeth uses them to her, [his] dearest partner of greatness', as a demonstration of his affection for her. Lady Macbeth, reconceiving them, turns two of them back on him, thinking how 'great' he is and what has been 'promised' (17, 15, 21) to him. He wanted her to be not 'ignorant' of the future; she turns that third word also, using it with supreme contempt to describe the moment as 'This ignorant present' (line 56)—'The language forces the two to converge.'

Powerful as these terms may be in their dialogue, one word she uses was, significantly, not in the letter: 'hereafter'; she greets Macbeth: 'Greater than both by the all hail hereafter!' (54). The Third Witch had said: 'All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!' (1.3.48); but the letter had said: they 'all-hailed me Thane of Cawdor' and 'Hail, King that shalt be!' (1.5.6-9). Lady Macbeth's phrase is a fusion of these messages, using the 'all hail' that describes the present thaneship to confirm the 'hereafter' that describes the future kingship. Forcing the instant to control the future. It is her way. Lady Macbeth's phrase, 'all-hail hereafter', adopting the 'time word' that will 'ring powerfully later', is a brief abstract of the Witch's salutation, a collapsing or foreshortening of time, 'a shorthand reprise of the Sisters' greeting'. W. A. Wright observed that 'Lady Macbeth speaks as if she had heard the words as spoken by the witch'; and John Upton, the noted textual scholar of the eighteenth century, finding the presence of the word in Lady Macbeth's speech so jarring with its absence in Macbeth's letter, supposed that the text of the letter was defective, should have had 'hereafter' in it, 'for this word she uses emphatically when she greets Macbeth … being the [word] of the Witch'.

It is the word of the Witch, first used in the play by the Third Witch (1.3.48), that tantalizes Macbeth with the hope that will lead to his destruction. It appears again, properly used, we may say, by the rightful monarch to suggest his rightful control of the future: 'Malcolm, whom we name hereafter / The Prince of Cumberland' (1.4.38-9). Having heard the word from the Witch in Scene 3, interpreting it as a temptation, Macbeth hears it again (140 lines later) from his King in Scene 4 in a context to which he says he will give his full allegiance (1.4.22-7)—but which he immediately rejects (48-53): 'The Prince of Cumberland—that is a step / On which I must fall down or else o'erleap' (48-9).

The vacillation in Macbeth's response to the word is terminated by Lady Macbeth's use of it in Scene 5, a scant 73 lines further on (1.5.54). This trio of uses—three times in three consecutive scenes within 217 lines—offers a set of references to the future that will have impressed Macbeth's mind in three different ways, the last way, Lady Macbeth's way, being the final and dominant one. To ensure the 'promised' hereafter, Lady Macbeth will 'feel now / The future in the instant' (1.5.56-7). The relationship that the two Macbeths have to time, one uncertain and one assertive, is perfectly and concisely represented in the collocation between them.
just after Duncan's murder:

Macbeth When?
Lady Macbeth       Now.
(2.2.16)

In order to remove the question and to make the future in the instant, now, Lady Macbeth proposes to 'beguile
the time' (1.5.62); Macbeth accepts that way of life, echoing her idea (though not her term) in his 'mock the
time' (1.7.81). This echo speaks the crucial change in Macbeth's attitude to time; he has forgotten his
normative attitude towards the movement of time with which he properly concluded his response to the
Witches' prophecies: 'Come what come may, / Time and the hour runs through the roughest day' (1.3.145-6). Thanks to the encouragement and threats of his wife, however, he now is 'settled, and bend[s] up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat' (1.7.79-80). No longer will he allow that 'chance may crown me / Without my stir' (1.3.142-3). He begins to stir.

The word of the Witch resonates powerfully in these three early scenes of the play. Its presence in Lady
Macbeth's speech invites the question: how came she by that word? Since no editor has seen fit to accept
Upton's textual explanation by adding the 'omitted' word to Macbeth's letter, we may seek an explanation
within the existing text. We may argue that just as Macbeth has adopted the phrase of the Witch that he never
heard, so Lady Macbeth here adopts the word of the Witch that she never read.

'Come, you spirits', she says (1.5.39). Can there be any doubt but that they will come? What spirit could resist
so charming an invitation to such an interesting programme of activity and entertainment? The play is a play
of hospitality perverted, its great central scene (3.4) the banquet in which Macbeth particularly wishes to
establish order (line 1) and to promote health (line 38) (in both which efforts he fails, being no true
King—lines 109, 118, 119). To this banquet he specifically invites Banquo (3.1.15, 29). Can there be any
doubt but that he will accept? As Banquo, coming from his realm of the supernatural, accepts Macbeth's
invitation, so, we may argue, the Witches, coming from theirs, accept Lady Macbeth's. One of the proofs of
their presence is the fact that Lady Macbeth in both action and word seems to have become unsexed, seems to
have become mannish. Confirmation of their presence in her body is the presence of their word 'hereafter' in
her vocabulary.

The word of the Witch becomes Lady Macbeth's word; its fourth and final use in the play is spoken by
Macbeth at her death: 'She should have died hereafter' (5.5.16). It is Macbeth's epitaph for his wife; it is all
that he has to give her. In the hereafter that they thought they would have, there would have been time for a
longer epitaph than this, but 'now' there is no time. Those who mocked the time have no time. They sought the
future in the instant; they secured it. As might, therefore, have been expected, when the normal calendrical
future comes, there is nothing mere. 'Naught's had, all's spent' (3.2.6), says she; and he discovers that their life
has been one 'Signifying nothing' (5.5.27). Lady Macbeth's use of the word 'hereafter' deranged the regular
sequence of time; his use restores it. But it is too late. Discovering the futility of the theory of time that he has
espoused, Macbeth returns, after the brief epitaph for his wife, to thoughts of himself and to his original
understanding of the sequence of time—'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace
from day to day' (5.5.18-19)—though it is an understanding tempered now with sad experience that proved
the Witches right, that what seemed fair was foul and that what offered 'fairest show' has proven to be most foul.

That lesson, we may say, Banquo understands from the beginning, having heard his partner link fairness and
foulness in his opening speech. At the salutations of the Witches, Macbeth, as Banquo tells us, 'start[s] and
seem[s] to fear / Things that do sound so fair' (1.3.49-50). Banquo is the first to use the word fear in the
play, introducing here a series of more instances of this word than are to be found in any other of
Shakespeare's plays: Macbeth is the most fear-filled play of the canon. Macbeth's response, then, is correct: in
this play things that sound fair are to be feared, and perhaps Banquo's cautious self apprehends the fact that things that sound fair are to be feared because they are, in the proof, foul. 'The fear-fair sound-pun mirrors fair-foul; something dark shadows this golden promise.' Banquo links the two near homonyms fair and fear in consecutive lines and repeats one of them eight lines later (line 58). Though the two words may not sound with a phonic identity to some natural ears, they resound with a suggestive echo in the ear of memory, even as the mind disambiguates their significations.

It is no doubt too much to claim that Banquo, echoing one of the two key words of the Witches, has shown a susceptibility to the Witches of a lesser degree but not of a different kind from that of Macbeth; but it is certainly true that, immediately after he has used one of 'their' words, 'fair/fear', the Witches speak to him as they spoke to Macbeth after Macbeth had used their vocabulary. The dauntless temper of Banquo's mind, however, protects him. When the Witches vanish mysteriously, he associates them with the basest element, their natural element, the earth; he is disposed to think ill of them. Macbeth, on the other hand, disposed to think well of them, supposes they have returned upward to their natural element, the air (1.3.79-80), a pleasing hope that he repeats in the letter to his wife. Banquo is rightly seen in this first encounter as setting the standard of integrity and probity from which Macbeth is later to fall off, but it should be noted in Macbeth's defence that his final response to the blandishments of the Witches is, like Banquo's, that he shall not be tempted. We learn later that Macbeth and his Lady have previously (several times?) considered taking action to secure the crown for Macbeth (1.7.47-52); each time the idea has arisen, however, Macbeth has rejected it. The latest and last rejection is before us: 'We will proceed no further in this business' (1.7.31). His record is beyond reproach—indeed his integrity, we may say, is stronger than Banquo's: it has been tested and found firm. Banquo's probity has not before now been tested.

Such testing is soon to come. Banquo is suddenly made aware of his unique and privileged position. Before the meeting of the thanes held after the death of Duncan, Banquo speaks his mind:

let us meet
And question this most bloody piece of work,
To know it further. Fears and scruples shake us.
In the great hand of God I stand, and thence
Against the undivulged pretence I fight
Of treasonous malice.

(2.3.126-31)

Banquo's shift from the plural mat includes all the thanes to the singular—himself only—marks his recognition that he is a privileged witness: he has information that no one else has about the death of Duncan. Here he vows before God to fight against the treason and malice so far undivulged. He makes this statement suspecting, we must suppose, that the pretence is on the part of his friend: he must suspect Macbeth. We know that Banquo has dreams of the Witches: 'I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters' (2.1.19), and that in his nightmares or his sleepless state he has 'cursed thoughts' (2.1.8). What those may have been he does not say, but they were so seriously threatening as to drive Banquo to pray to the 'Merciful powers' mat those thoughts be restrained—natural though they were—or that he be restrained in thinking them (2.1.7-8).

What then, in this condition, is he to make of Macbeth's proposal 'cleave to [his] consent, when 'tis' (2.1.24)? When 'tis' occurred a few hours later, at the meeting of the thanes in the hall after the death of Duncan. At that moment, standing in the hand of God, Banquo had his test. He failed. He said nothing. He had vowed that he would fight against pretence and malice; instead, when his test came, he held his peace and, in so doing, clove to Macbeth's consent. He said nothing; it is not unreasonable to suppose that had he disclosed the knowledge he had in his privileged position, the election would not have fallen on Macbeth (2.4.29-32).
He might have kept silent from timidity, or from an unwillingness to speculate, or from a reluctance to stand
in the way of his good friend's advancement; he might have kept silent because he was greedy for the
'honour'—the greatness promised to him by Macbeth (2.1.25). It is more likely, however, that he kept silent
because he realized that until Macbeth was king and the Witches' royal prophecy had been fulfilled, his own
children would be unlikely to reign in their turn (3.1.5-10). He wishes the prophecies to be 'truth' (line 6),
though he knows that 'The instruments of darkness tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles to betray's / In
deepest consequence' (1.3.122-4). As Macbeth needed the 'truth' of the advancement to Cawdor to make him
especially vulnerable to the gaining of the kingship, so Banquo needed the 'truth' of Macbeth's advancement to
the kingship to make him especially vulnerable to the temptation of the advancement of his children.24
Macbeth's third 'truth' was the happy prologue to set up Banquo's swelling 'hope' of the imperial theme for his
children (1.3.126-8; 3.1.10). Banquo knows in his heart that Macbeth has done the thing which he ought not to
have done; he is not fully aware that at the meeting of the thanes he himself has left undone the thing he ought
to have done. There is no health in either of them. Banquo's silence is the tie that knits him indissolubly to
Macbeth (3.1.16-18); his 'advice', as Macbeth terms it, has been 'both grave and prosperous' (3.1.21-2).
Prosperous for Macbeth, grave for Banquo.

The deterioration in Banquo's character is represented by the deterioration in Banquo's diction. It has been
intimated that he has used—three times, in fact—one of the words of the Witch or its homonym: he now uses
the other; and he uses the two words in conjunction, just as Macbeth had done before:

Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all
As the weird women promised;25 and I fear
Thou played'st most fouly for't.26

(3.1.1-3)

The fair promise was to be feared because it was foul.27 Banquo, like Macbeth, has echoed the crucial words
of the Witches.

Shakespeare sharpens the significance of this passage by one of the instances of ironic juxtaposition for which
this compact play is famous.28 At the end of the preceding scene, the Old Man, the embodiment of wisdom,
addressing himself first to Ross, prays in the concluding couplet:

God's benison go with you, and with those
That would make good of bad, and friends of
foes.

(2.4.41-2)

'Enter Banquo'—the only character who had indeed the knowledge that might have made good of bad and
friends of foes.29 He chose not to use it; he remained silent. The first words he speaks after that failure to
speak are the words of the Witches. Banquo speaks these words to characterize Macbeth and Macbeth's guilty,
not himself and his own. That is not surprising: we need no bubbles come from the earth to tell us that humans
in their frailty see in others those sins which they are unable to see in themselves.

Long ago Bradley recognized the deterioration of Banquo's character;30 Granville-Barker, Richard J. Jaarsma,
and Marvin Rosenberg have argued in support of Bradley's view, still not generally accepted. Banquo's
language suggests that Bradley was right. Like Macbeth, like Lady Macbeth, Banquo has chosen to speak the
language of the Witches. Lady Macbeth deliberately and with manly re-solve placed herself under the control
of the Witches; Macbeth rejected that control firmly (1.7.31) as he unmanly and weakly submitted to the
control of his wife; Banquo negligently allowed himself to be seduced by them. These three central characters,
in ways peculiar to their personalities and defining of those personalities, labour to work out their own
damnations.
Notes

1 See Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Macbeth* (Berkeley, 1978), pp. 35-6, for some of the suggestiveness.


4 Rosenberg, p. 114. In addition to the uses of these two adjectives, cited here in conjunction, each occurs twice in the play used singly. *Fair* occurs in the King's description of Lady Macbeth as 'Fair and noble hostess' (1.6.24) and in the Messenger's description of Lady Macduff as 'Fair dame' (4.2.66). We might argue that only one of these ladies is truly fair. The King's observation is inadequate; he himself acknowledges that he cannot find the mind's construction in the face. (The King's sons, how-ever, have the ability that their father lacked: Malcolm's extended testing of Macduff (4.3.1-126) demonstrates his corrective to his father's inadequacy, and even Donalbain recognizes that a smile may conceal a dagger (2.3.139).) *Foul* occurs in what might almost be a gloss on these two disparate references to *fair*: 'Though all things foul would wear the brows of grace, / Yet grace must still look so' (4.3.24-5, Malcolm's perceptive observation). And the Scots Doctor observes that 'Foul whisperings are abroad. Unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles' (5.1.68-9), the only issue of the Macbeths' generating.


7 For interesting observations of another kind on Lady Macbeth's reception of the letter see Mark Taylor, 'Letters and Readers in *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Twelfth Night*', *Philological Quarterly*, 69 (1990), 31-53. The letter functions in the play 'chiefly as a way of revealing something about the motives and proclivities of the [person who reads it]' (p. 31). 'What Macbeth puts into his letter is not, for the most part, what Lady Macbeth reads out of it' (p. 35).

8 Macbeth's phrase in the letter, 'more … than mortal knowledge'—he seems to have investigated their credentials—becomes Lady Macbeth's 'mortal thoughts'. And the spirits—the 'weird sisters'—'tend on' those thoughts of mortality. Her destructive 'tend on' of line 40 mocks her considerate 'Give him tending' in line 36.

9 These written words of Macbeth's constitute the only reference in the play to Lady Macbeth's becoming a queen; the Lady herself never mentions any desire on her own part for queenship. The absence of any such expression is the more remarkable since in Holinshed she is 'verie ambitious' in her personal lust for a crown (*Chronicles of Scotland*, p. 171).

10 Rosenberg, p. 115. These two instances of the word 'ignorant', both spoken by Lady Macbeth, are the only two in the play.

11 As customarily in Shakespeare, the quoting of an earlier speech is inexact, but the intent is sufficiently clear to Lady Macbeth.

12 Ibid., p. 234.

13 Ibid.

Macbeth echoes himself in the use of the word 'o'erleap' in his later soliloquy (1.7.27), in both instances perverting a normal process of ascent—climbing a set of stairs, mounting a horse—by an action inappropriate or inept that causes him to 'fall' (1.4.51; 7.28). I owe to a former student the insight that Macbeth here, depersonalizing, transmutes a human into a thing.

And, we may be confident, the roughest night—2.3.60.

As 'bend up' signifies Macbeth's commitment in the first part of the play, leading on to the crisis of 3.4, so 'I am bent to know' (3.4.133) signifies his commitment in the second part of the play, leading on to the catastrophe of 5.10.

The Variorum edition (p. 60) quotes Mrs Jameson's excited response to hearing this word on the stage (vol. 11, p. 324): 'those who have heard Mrs Siddons pronounce the word hereafter, cannot forget the look, the tone, which seemed to give her auditors a glimpse of that awful future, which she, in her prophetic fury, beholds upon the instant'. Another powerful lady, Mrs Dorothy Dunnett, has used the word to conjure up a grandly imaginative account of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in *King Hereafter* (1982).

Richard J. Jaarsma, in 'The Tragedy of Banquo', *Literature and Psychology*, 17 (1967), 87-94, suggests that Banquo at 2.1.6-9 'for the first time … recognizes, as Macbeth did not, the Witches' evil intent' (p. 91); the recognition may have come sooner.

Rosenberg, p. 116.

Helge Kokeritz, *Shakespeare's Pronunciation* (New Haven, 1953), identified these two words as homonyms—they 'were often pronounced alike' (p. 106); but Fausto Cercignano, *Shakespeare's Works and Elizabethan Pronunciation* (Oxford, 1981) finds that in this passage 'word-play is based on antithesis not identity' (p. 235). Nevertheless, he gives examples of passages in which *fair* and *fear*, though never rhyming to one another, rhyme to the same words: *fair: air: ear: appear: there: bear: fear* (pp. 80, 167, 238). Though the two words are, and could be sounded as, phonologically distinct, it is clear that they were not always sounded so. Various speakers used variant soundings in varying contexts. Professor Ronald Butters, to whom I am obliged in this matter, notes that 'there has been much interaction/interchange between the -ear and -air vowels in the history of English, and [the distinction] was very much in flux in Shakespeare's day' (Correspondence, 31 March 1993). The trio of homonymic words in this passage (1.3.49-58) is exactly balanced in *Venus and Adonis*, 1083-6. In both works, Shakespeare is playing with the echo; if the words are inexact homonyms to the ear, their sounds are sufficiently close to provide an echo to the mind.

Though Banquo begins this speech with the straightforward statement that the thanes should dress in proper and decent attire before they reassemble (line 125), when Macbeth echoes the metaphor in line 132, the same image suggests a covering over of hypocrisy and deceit (Jaarsma, p. 92).

Walker notices that Macbeth's insinuating 'cleave' echoes Banquo's harmless use in 1.3.144.

Noted also by Jaarsma (p. 93).

'Promised' is itself a word interesting in its associations. It is used four times in the play, thrice by the Macbeths and here finally by Banquo. Macbeth uses it first to describe the predictions of the Witches (1.3.118) because he wishes to persuade himself that the fore-tellings pertaining to himself are in fact binding commitments promised. In his letter, as we have seen, he transfers the word (1.5.12) to his wife, who uses it...
with a positiveness and a determination keener than those of her husband: 'and [thou] shalt be / What thou art promised' (1.5.14-15). When Banquo uses the word here in its final appearance, he does so with the same assurance that marked the Macbeths' uses; though he speaks of the predictions as 'hope' (1.3.54; 3.1.10), here his 'promised' that defines Macbeth's future suggests that he regards his children's future as promised also. He has appropriated the word of the Macbeths and their attitude to it. Too late, however, Macbeth discovers that though the Witches 'keep the word of promise to our ear / [They] break it to our hope' (5.10.21-2).

Fear-foully will surely recall the pun that Banquo made when he first used fear and fair in 1.3.49-50, as they recall also Macbeth's fair and foul. Furthermore, Banquo's supposition that Macbeth '[played] most fouilly' echoes Lady Macbeth's assumption that he '[would] not play false' (1.5.20). But, at her urging, Macbeth does play false, assuming a 'false face' to hide 'what the false heart doth know' (1.7.82) (that false face does not deceive Malcolm (2.3.135-6); see also ). Later, Macbeth falsely '[plays] the humble host' (3.4.4), though a murderer.

Though, as has been noted, fair and foul are often linked in the proverbial and literary traditions, fear and foul are not; but fair, fear, are foul are linked in a work that Shakespeare knew intimately, Tamberlaine: 'Ah fair Zenocrate, divine Zenocrate, / Fair is too foul an epithet for thee, / That in thy passion for thy country's love, / And fear to see thy kingly father's harm … ' etc. (Part 1, 5.1.135-8).

Each of the three major characters has an entrance that ironically comments on the line of the preceding speaker: Macbeth's occurs at 1.4.14, after Duncan's lines 13-14; Lady Macbeth's is at 1.7.28, after Macbeth's line 25; Banquo's is here.

Walker proposes that 'the first phrase is for Ross and the rest spoken after the retreating … Macduff (p. 82), and Rosenberg concurs. I would suggest that Macduff 'retreats' after his last line (39), marking his solo exit from the stage with a rhymed couplet. Ross then addresses the Old Man, whose reply, also a rhymed couplet, includes a blessing specifically on Ross, who leaves now (41) (not in company with Macduff who earlier headed off to Fife), and another on 'those' unspecified persons who would make good of bad. The first such person, ironically, is Banquo, who arrives now. Prior critics have been misled by the traditional 'act break'—in reality no more than a scene break, as we now know.


**Who Has No Children in Macbeth?: Introduction**

**Who "Has No Children" in Macbeth?**

Tom Clayton, University of Minnesota

He has no children.

*Macbeth* 4.3.216

He that has no children knows not what love is.

Tilley, Dent C341
The Masks of Shakespeare's plays demonstrate throughout that Shakespeare's ways make a settled view of his proceedings impossible to maintain unaltered so long as one continues to return to the scene of his playwrighting. The view I hold of Shakespeare's Macbeth at this writing is that he is a villain-hero—more than a mere protagonist—fatally ambitious but once full enough of the milk of human kindness to require letting by his wife in order to dare do more than may become a man, and so become none. He lives just long enough to know himself, too well, a regicide and worse, and to die in action by another's deed of the kind that made him a hero in the first place. He thus restores in a measure, however high his head upon a pole at play's end, something of the sometime man in place of the type and title of his reign. The Tyrant. He is throughout the observed of all observers, like Hamlet in this and in his vividness of imagination. His hope shattered in "success," he passes through security to desperation. The Weird Sisters gave him the first two, by his subjective piecing out of the first alone and taking the second too trustingly for granted—until he hears the word of promise of his ear broken to his hope in the word of Macduff's birth from his mother's womb untimely ripped. The better parts of even a desperate Macbeth are both there in the end, as traces of the man of milk as well as of defender's blood he was and fleetingly becomes again:

Of all men else I have avoided thee [Macduff].
But get thee back, my soul is too much charg'd
With blood of thine already.

(5.8.4-6)

His initial lack of fear is due to his "security," but even when that proves to have been a delusion he accepts Macduff's challenge with alacrity:

Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,
And thou oppos'd, being of no woman born,
Yet I will try the last. Before my body
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,
And damn'd be him that first cries, "Hold, enough!"

(5.8.30-34)

Famous last words, matter for an epitaph.

In 1.3 with fortune-teller's trifles like "hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor" (a transfer of title already declared by Duncan in 1.2.64-65 but news to Macbeth) and "hail to thee, that shall be King hereafter," the Weird Sisters marshalled Macbeth the way that he was going. When he goes of his own volition to visit them in 4.1, the dramatic (and literary) design, as foreshadowing, converges with motivation, mimetic action, and significance as prophetic truth itself, the power of which Macbeth seems to have conferred upon the Weird Sisters by killing Duncan and sealing his own fate. Each of their three prophesying caveats comes true—in reverse of the order in which they were given, and Macbeth dies to his deep damnation when he tries "the last"—that is, the first—of the Weird Sisters' caveats:

Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! Beware Macduff,
Beware the Thane of Fife,

(4.1.71-72)
"He has no children." The half-line is declarative, metrical and limpid, and apparently without depth or guile on anyone's part—until one asks who "He" is. And thereby hangs a tale. More hangs on the answer than appears at first glance, and the question requires referring not to those two familiar, mild-mannered misleaders, preemptive paraphrase and tendentious description, but to the primary evidence of word and other action of the context, for an answer. There is an unwritten standing law that quotations should be few and brief; when this law is combined with the fact that readers seldom have a copy of the subject texts open at their side, a not uncommon result is some critical slippage between text and reader, occasionally including slippage between text and critic that is compounded in the reader. The pertinent local context follows, with my interpolations (of 1, 2, and 3) marked by {}. In 4.3, the first subscene consists in the long duologue between Macduff and Malcolm on the latter's fitness for rule that is terminated when the Doctor enters for the subscene concerned with the miracles of Edward the Confessor, which in turn gives way to the third subscene with Ross's entrance (at 160) and arrival from Scotland with news that he is understandably loath and slow to deliver.3 Asked by Macduff, "Stands Scotland where it did?" he replies,

Alas, poor country,
Almost afraid to know itself! It cannot 165
Be call'd our mother, but our grave; where nothing,

But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile;
Where sighs, and groans, and shrieks that rent the air
Are made, not mark'd; where violent sorrow seems
A modern ecstasy. The dead man's knell 170
Is there scarce ask'd for who, and good men's lives
Expire before the flowers in their caps,
Dying or ere they sicken.
Macduff. O relation!
Too nice, and yet too true.
Malcolm. What's the newest grief?
Ross. That of an hour's age doth hiss the speaker; 175
Each minute teems a new one.
Macduff. How does my wife?
Ross. Why, well.
Macduff. And all my children?
Ross. Well too.
Macduff. The tyrant has not batter'd at their peace?
Ross. No, they were well at peace when I did leave 'em. 179

Ross. Your castle is surpris'd; your wife, and babes, 205
Savagely slaughter'd. To relate the manner,
Were on the quarry of these murther'd deer
To add the death of you.

{1} Malcolm. Merciful heaven!
What, man, ne'er pull your hat upon your brows;
Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break. 210

Macduff. My children too? (to Ross, ignoring Malcolm)

Ross. Wife, children, servants, all
That could be found.

Macduff. And I must be from thence!
My wife kill'd too? (to Ross)

Ross. I have said.

Let's make us med'cines of our great revenge
To cure this deadly grief. 215

Macduff. He has no children. All my pretty
ones? (to Ross, ignoring Malcolm)

Did you say all? O hell-kite! (i.e., Macbeth) All?
What, all my pretty chickens, and their dam
At one fell swoop?


Macduff. I shall do so; (finally, to Malcolm) 220
But I must also feel it as a man;
I cannot but remember such things were,
That were most precious to me. Did heaven look on,
And would not take their part? Sinful Macduff,
They were all strook for thee! naught that I am, 225
Not for their own demerits, but for mine,
Fell slaughter on their souls. Heaven rest them now!

Malcolm. Be this the whetstone of your sword, let grief
Convert to anger; blunt not the heart, enrage it.

Macduff. O, I could play the woman with mine eyes, 230
And braggart with my tongue! But, gentle heavens,
Cut short all intermission. Front to front
Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself;
Within my sword's length set him; if he scape,
Heaven forgive him too!

Malcolm. This [tune] goes manly. 235

Come go we to the King, our power is ready,
Our lack is nothing but our leave. Macbeth
Is ripe for shaking, and the pow'rs above
Put on their instruments. Receive what cheer you may,
The night is long that never finds the day.240

Exeunt.

(4.3-164-180, 205-40)

In this triologue, Malcolm is mostly silent but three times speaks briefly to Macduff as prompted by his verbal
reactions to Ross's answers. Macduff does not respond to Malcolm, speaking only to Ross, formally and as
much or more to himself, finally responding directly to Malcolm only the third time Malcolm speaks to him
(4.3.219, 220).
So who "has no children" in line 216? Malcolm, who is present, or Macbeth, who is not? The gloss in David Bevington's Bantam edition (1988) reads, "i.e., no father would do such a thing (?), or he (Malcolm) speaks comfort without knowing what such a loss feels like (?)" (4.3.217n). If "no father" is as presumably meant to be Macbeth, this note levels opposing solutions to the problem of ambiguity of reference—the "indeterminacy" or "indefinition" of a sort—and the differences of interpretation attending it. To my present way of thinking, the immediate context and the whole scene quite readily disambiguate by themselves, but the local reference in this case is also germane to Macbeth and Macbeth in relation to the meaning and significance of the whole play.?

When such critical questions arise—about the parental status of the Macbeths, for example—it is natural for students of all kinds to turn from the script itself to diverse authorities, such as current scholarly and reading editions; studies of the play in performance and performances themselves; perennials like A. C. Bradley's Shakespearean Tragedy (1904) and later discussions like Geoffrey Bullough's Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare (1975); and classic essays on or near the subject, notably L. C. Knights's celebrated "How Many Children Had Lady Mac-, beth?" and Cleanth Brooks's equally celebrated "Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness." The respective collections of their own essays reprinting these came out in the same year, 1947, two years after the end of World War II, appropriately enough, nearly half a century ago but still—or again—worth reading, along with Bradley and many studies now out of print.

For its comprehensiveness and circumspection the first of all resorted to—and also the last, often enough and for good reason—might well be Marvin Rosenberg's masterful Masks of Macbeth (1978), which makes a case both persuasive and (in an appendix) genially speculative for the Macbeths' parenthood. He sums up the critical position at the time as represented by the Variorum edition of 1901-3, which, "canvassing a spectrum of criticism, cites about as many who refer the He to Macbeth as to Malcolm" (554). Perhaps that is still the case at this end of the century, but it is not easy to tell, because when the half-line is not glossed in place or somewhere else it is impossible to know the editor or critic's view further than to suppose that he must have thought interpretation obvious and a gloss redundant. And if obvious, then by implication Shakespeare's unambiguous intention. Editorial silence seems to mean that "He" is Macbeth. The lengthier the gloss, the more likely is identification of "He" as Malcolm, who is technically eligible as "yet / Unknown to woman" (126-27), if he is telling Macduff the truth at that point; but such a contrast suggests that his proponents may protest too much, Occam's razor-wise.

Perhaps the most self-assured recent case for Malcolm is given by Nicholas Brooke in his Oxford/World's Classics edition (1990, 4.3.216n):

1. Malcolm would not offer such a simplistic cure if he had children of his own; 2. Revenge on Macbeth's children is impossible because he has none; 3. If Macbeth had children, he would not have slaughtered others. The first sense seems to me an inevitable snub to Malcolm's glib haste. See proverb "he that has no children knows not what love is," Dent C341 (emphasis mine)

—which proverb applies as well—and better—to Macbeth.

The locus classicus of modern critical reasoning on the subject is Bradley's Note EE, beginning "Three interpretations have been offered of the words 'He has no children'" (399). Brooke (1990) naturally follows Bradley's exposition there with his own "spin," as does Kenneth Muir without spin in the New Arden edition (1962, 4.3.216n), whose neutral description reads,

There are three explanations of this passage, (i) He [Macduff] refers to Malcolm, who if he had children of his own would not suggest revenge as a cure for grief. Cf. John III.iv.91: "He
talks to me that never had a son." This was supported by Malone and Bradley. (ii) He refers to Macbeth, on whom he cannot take an appropriate revenge. . . . (iii) He refers to Macbeth, who would never have slaughtered Macduff’s children if he had had any of his own. Cf. 3 Hen. VI V. v. 63: "You have no children, butchers if you had. / The thought of them would have stirred up remorse.” (Delius). I adhere to (ii). (emphasis mine)

Bradley had cited in more detail the parallels in King John and Henry VI, Part Three (5.5.63): in King John, "Pandulph says to Constance, 'You hold too heinous a respect of grief,' and Constance answers, 'He talks to me that never had a son'“ (399), a parallel supporting Malcolm. In 3H6 "Margaret says to the murderers of Prince Edward, 'You have no children, butchers! if you had, / The thought of them would have stirred up remorse'" (400), a parallel supporting Macbeth; but Bradley "see[s] no argument except that the words of Macduff almost repeat those of Margaret; and this fact does not seem to have much weight. It shows only that Shakespeare might easily use the words in the sense of (c) if that sense were suitable to the occasion" (400).

Bradley's reasoning in favor of Malcolm is sound, as far as it goes, and I do not slight it here in quoting only his conclusions and primary reasons. Unlike Muir later, Bradley could not "think interpretation (6 [= ii]) the most natural," partly because

Macduff is not the man to conceive at any time the idea of killing children in retaliation; and that he contemplates it here, even as a suggestion, I find it hard to believe. . . . Macduff listens only to Ross. . . . When Malcolm interrupts, therefore, he puts aside his suggestion with four words spoken to himself, or (less probably) to Ross (his relative, who knew his wife and children), and continues his agonised questions and exclamations. (400)

There are two main arguments against Macduff’s referring to Malcolm. The first and most obvious is the immediate dramatic context itself. The difference between Bradley's neutral and Brooke's indignant characterizing of Malcolm's attempted interventions demonstrates the latitude and subjectivity of perception here, but the primary emphasis should be not on Malcolm's "glib haste" (or whatever it is) but on what Macduff's dialogue shows of himself: he is in shock, preoccupied with his loss and its causes, his guilty absence as he sees it and the murderer acting in his absence. He gives no hint that he even hears Malcolm until his third try; and, while an actor's delivery could easily effect a glancing reference to Malcolm, such reference is gratuitous, the more so in reproach of Malcolm. In the lines in question, 216-19, his concentration alternates between his murdered children and their murderer—"He" (Macbeth), all his children, "hell-kite" Macbeth, his children and their mother:

Macduff. He has no children. All my pretty ones? (to Ross, ignoring Malcolm)
Did you say all? O hell-kite! (i.e., Macbeth) All?
What, all my pretty chickens and their dam
At one fell swoop?

This intense concentration does not change direction until Malcolm's "Dispute it like a man." From there to the end of the scene Malcolm and the just retribution in prospect carry his attention and his animus, which includes his self-rebuke to "sinful Macduff and his invoking "gentle heavens" to

Cut short all intermission. Front to front
Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself;
Within my sword's length set him; if he scape,
Heaven forgive him too!

(4.3.231-35)
The scene ends on a stirring martial note that heralds the coming end of oppression and the Tyrant, advancing the "Western" aspect of Macbeth toward the showdown and the morality play that combines poetic justice with the tragic finale.

I should add that I think—not everyone does—that Malcolm's character in the entire play and in this scene as King-in-waiting is that of a worthy successor to Duncan very like his father, one whose attempted interventions with Macduff seem intended to be seen as sympathetic, and tentative and inexperienced in such cases rather than as gauche, callow, and deserving of rebuke. Within the earlier part of the scene there is little enough to go on, however, which partly justifies Bradley and others' confining their attention to the immediate context alone: earlier Macduff was first shocked by Malcolm's confession of his vices of lust and avarice, and then stunned by his abrupt change when convinced of Macduff's integrity. Not surprisingly, to Malcolm's "Why are you silent?" then, he replies laconically, "Such welcome and unwelcome things at once / 'Tis hard to reconcile" (137-39).

**Who Has No Children in Macbeth?: 3**

The second argument and the more telling is the connection of him who "has no children" with the play as a whole. With Malcolm as "He," there is no connection of consequence, and the effect is local and the line an ephemeral throwaway. With Macbeth as "He," there is profound and reverberating resonance, and the line articulates a theme of the play and tacit motive of the protagonist hinted at elsewhere but made explicit—and succinctly so—here. As L. C. Knights describes one aspect of it (Explorations 40n), "The Macbeth-Banquo opposition is emphasized when we learn that Banquo's line will 'stretch out to the cracke of Doome' (4.1.117). Macbeth is cut off from the natural sequence, 'He has no children (4.3.217), he is a 'Monster' (5.7.54). Macbeth's isolation is fully brought out in the last Act" (emphasis mine).

The ambiguous question of parental status is forced tantalizingly upon any interpreter's attention, critical or theatrical, at several points. Presumably we are meant to believe that Lady Macbeth has "given suck" (1.7.54), as she says she has; and though Macbeth tells her to "Bring forth men-children only!" (1.7.72), there is no evidence in the received text of when she might have had this experience of breast-feeding (a Scottish practice not shared by upper-class English women), and no explicit reference made to a child or children dead or alive begotten by Macbeth or born to Lady Macbeth. In the sources Lady Macbeth had at least one son (Lulach) by an earlier marriage (to Gillecomgain, Bullough 433), and those may well explain the origin of "I have given suck"—but cannot explain its significance and effect in the play as we have it, where the details in context are

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I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.
```

(1.7.54-59)

In a play in which others' children figure so prominently by themselves and in relation to their parents—Banquo's, Duncan's, Macduff's and Lady Macduff's, Old Siward's, and one might add the second and third Apparitions as well as Banquo's royal descendants—this is a curious oversight. Certain it is that Macbeth is haunted by his fear of Banquo, for "'Tis much he dares" (3.1.50), despite the fact that he might well find reason for security in Banquo's further strength, that "He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valor / To act in safety" (52-53), except that "under him / My genius is rebuked, as it is said / Mark Antony's was by Caesar" (54-56). He immediately recalls of the Weird Sisters that speaking to Banquo,
prophet-like, 
They hail'd him father to a line of kings. 
Upon my head they plac'd a fruitless crown, 
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe, 
Thence to be wrench'd with an un lineal hand, 
No son of mine succeeding. If t be so, 
For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind, 
For them the gracious Duncan have I murther'd, 
Put rancors in the vessel of my peace 
Only for them, and mine eternal jewel 
Given to the common enemy of man, 
To make them kings—the seeds of Banquo kings! 
Rather than so, come fate into the list, 
And champion me to th' utterance!

(58-71, emphasis mine)\(^1\)

"No son of mine" stillborn or otherwise dead, or living now, or to be born hereafter. But one thing is very clear about the play as we have it, that we see no Macbeth child, son or daughter, and we hear no unequivocal reference to one. It would be reasonable (if idle) therefore to infer that Macbeth offspring were little if at all on Shakespeare's mind, as they well might not be, since he had none in the sources. "Following" sources in silence leaves ambiguous traces (propter hoc or only post hoc?), but the play as it is concentrated on Macbeth, the relationship between wife and husband, and to a lesser extent Lady Macbeth herself.\(^1\)

It is surprising that in his classic essay on the play Cleanth Brooks says nothing at all about these matters, but as his title implies his interest was especially in the contrasting symbolism of pity, as with "the naked babe" of 1.7, and with the mere "cloak of manliness" of one who dressed but could not act the part ("Now does he feel his title / Hang loose about him, liked giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief," 5.2.20-22ff.)

It is not surprising that L. C. Knights in his ironically witty title did not address his own question, because his purpose in discussing "a re-orientation of Shakespeare criticism" (Explorations 15, "How Many" part 1) was to discourage the study of Shakespeare's characters as persons in their own right beyond the limits of the plays in which they are articulated.

[T]he bulk of Shakespeare criticism is concerned with his characters, his heroines, his love of Nature or his "philosophy"—with everything, in short, except with the words on the page, which it is the main business of the critic to examine. I wish to consider . . . how this paradoxical state of affairs arose. To examine the historical development of the kind of criticism that is mainly concerned with "character" is to strengthen the case against it. (20)

Concluding, with the polemical exclusiveness usual to theoretical claim-staking, that "the only profitable approach to Shakespeare is a consideration of his plays as dramatic poems, of his use of language to obtain a total complex emotional response" (20), in part 2 he asks "How should we read Shakespeare?" and gives as example a detailed analysis of Macbeth (ii), beginning "Macbeth is a statement of evil" (32)—"but it is a statement not of a philosophy but of ordered emotion" (45). In keeping with his method, he says nothing of the "I have given suck" speech in relation to character or action, but finds it an instance of "the violence of the imagery" that complements "explicit references to the unnatural" (37).\(^1\)

Both essays seem to me salutary for and beyond their day, and I see little enough to fault in either their orientation or their particular treatment, insofar as both were very much interested in the play as written, and attending to important aspects of the play previously neglected or ignored altogether. Because they are critical
and text/script-centered, such addresses translate readily enough into the terms of theatrical performance and criticism.

**Who Has No Children in Macbeth?: 4**

The local (in 4.3) and the global (the whole play, its world and its action) reciprocally affect each other according to the reader's interpretation or the actor's expression of their relationship and may also be said to effect each other, according to how either is interpreted and given priority, entailing a correlative significance in the other. If the Macbeths have children, or at least a child, then it would be nonsense for Macduff to say Macbeth "has no children." If there is no evidence that the Macbeths at the time of the play's action have children, for all practical purposes they have not. And it matters especially that Macbeth "has no children."

Closest to his wife in our perception when she reads his letter aloud before we see them together and again when they plan and execute their regicidal plot, Macbeth is by degrees cut off first from her, as he becomes progressively more depressed, fearful, and finally desperate; and then from virtually all but Seyton, by which time he has

\[ \ldots \text{liv'd long enough: my way of life} \]
\[ \text{Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf,} \]
\[ \text{And that which should accompany old age,} \]
\[ \text{As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,} \]
\[ \text{I must not look to have; but in their stead,} \]
\[ \text{Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath,} \]
\[ \text{Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.} \]

(5.3.22-28)

There is no mention of the unique solace of children, here, and the prospect of living progeny, greater than the earlier greatest, is behind. Macbeth is alone to face his future—his death and his damnation.

Finally, Macbeth's barrenness is significant as an unspecified but implicit motive for his killing others and their children, and it is significant in another—perhaps more—important way as symbolizing a moral desiccation and a spiritual sterility contrasting with the symbolic green thumbs (or fingers) of the "gardener"-kings, both Duncan the unfortunate and too trusting, who in 1.4.28-29 says he has "begun to plant thee [Macbeth], and will labor / To make thee full of growing"; and his son and heir, Malcolm, who, summing up his immediate obligations and responsibilities at the end of the play, says,

\[ \text{What's more to do} \]
\[ \text{Which would be planted newly with the time,} \]

\[ \ldots \ldots \]

\[ \ldots \text{. This, and what needful else} \]
\[ \text{That calls upon us, by the grace of Grace,} \]
\[ \text{We will perform in measure, time, and place.} \]

(5.9.30-31, 37-39, emphasis added)
Who Has No Children in Macbeth?: 5

Although the play, scene, and dialogue require identification of "He" for performance and for audience (and reader) understanding, a stage direction so refined might well seem impossible, Shavian, or absurd: easy enough as "glances at Malcolm" or "he means Macbeth" (SDs no editor understandably has seen fit to supply), but inevitably somewhat Shavian, and therefore not Shakespearean, if meant to indicate Macbeth and, more, suggest an array of nuances in action and verbal expression scarcely to be scored. It seems doubtful whether many stage or screen Macbeths can have referred "He has no children" to Malcolm, and I can say with certainty that Colum Convey did not in the most recent Macbeth I have seen, not at least on the evening of 21 August 1996 at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre.15

I admire unabashedly a view that humanizes a protagonist increasingly desperate and cornered by entertaining as his motive his natural concern for his son's patrimony, and on that account I warmly applaud "Lady Macbeth's Indispensable Child" (Rosenberg, Masks 671-76), the more so when the author's witty caveat is over the entrance to qualify his generosity:

Every Shakespearean is entitled to an imaginative speculation now and then, as long as he labels it speculation. This appendix speculates on an extratextual possibility in the staging of Macbeth. Anti-speculationists are warned. (671, author's emphasis)

No anti-speculationist I, just a pro-inferentialist, to whom 4.3 and the play say and show that Macbeth is the man of the hour in his play until he is out of time, a giant even as a "dwarfish thief," the Tyrant whose assassins have indeed battered at the peace of Macduff's wife and children (and also brought them the peace that passeth all understanding), and the King of fruitless crown and barren scepter accordingly on Macduff's distracted—hypothetical—mind as "He" who "has no children" and has been driven to desperation and libericide to try to prevent a future that comes upon him pari passu with his striving. That seems to be what makes Macbeth a tragedy, what made Macbeth Macbeth.

Notes

1 Quotations from Macbeth are from G. Blakemore Evans's Riverside Shakespeare, 2d ed. (1997).

Modern editions differ in the number of scenes in act 5. Hunter has six scenes. The Folio (followed by Brooke) has seven, occupying TLN 2395-2529 on a single opening at n3v-4r (758-59 of Charlton Hinman's Facsimile). Editions with eight scenes (e.g., Bevington, Foakes, Harbage) begin scene 8 at TLN 2435 ("Why should I play the Roman fool, and die"). Editions with nine scenes (e.g., Dent, Evans, Muir) begin 9 at TLN 2477 ("I would the friends we miss were safe arriv'd"). Wells and Taylor (and after them Greenblatt) have eleven scenes, distinguishing two scenes at TLN 2415 ("That way the noise is. Tyrant, show thy face!") and 2427 ("This way, my lord, the castle's gently render'd").

There are typographical and formal reasons (e.g., "Exeunt" and "Exit") in F itself for nine or eleven scenes, but the practical effects on the stage or in the reading are slight indeed; and, since fewer than 100 lines are involved, passages are easily located in any text.

2 For "the last" as fulfilling the first of the Weird Sisters' caveats, see my note, "Macbeth's 'Yet I will try the last' What?" The last caveat given in 4.1 is the first to be realized in a moving Birnam wood in 5.5; the second ("none of woman born") remains second, leaving the first given as "the last" to be tried.

3 Stephen Booth (106-11) gives detailed and witty attention both to 4.3 and "to Malcolm's behavior" as "the most perversive element in a perversive scene" (107), concluding that "Malcolm and Macduff are and remain our
allies, but in the morally insignificant terms of our likes and dislikes as audience to an entertainment they are—because this scene is—irritating to us” (111). "Shakespeare develops the socially and emotionally awkward exchange between Ross and Macduff in such a way that it resembles the work of a clumsy playwright. Not only does Macduff have to prod Ross, he does so in lines that lack verisimilitude and seem prompted by the despair of a writer who does not know his trade" (110). One doesn't have to share this view to find it thoughtfully and productively provocative.

4 Similar circumlocutory dialogue continues until Ross gives the awful news, beginning in line 204.

5 Lines 208-9 may go some way to explain the apparent design of Lear's last speech—a single half-line—and death in the 1608 Quarto version of the play, "Breake hart, I prethe breake" (L3). if the line in Q is Lear's by design and not by misplaced speech-heading: it is Kent's line in the Folio.

6 Evans and Muir make a single line of blank verse of the part-lines (220). Bevington, and Wells and Taylor (+ Greenblatt), treat both Malcolm's speech of three iambic feet and the two feet of the first line of Macduff's reply as short lines aligned with the left margin, like the ambiguous Folio (TLN 2069-70), in which part-lines of blank verse are all so aligned. Brooke leaves "I shall do so" as a short line, joining "Dispute it like a man" with "At one fell swoop?" (219). The distinction among the three would be lost in the theater and is of mainly editorial significance—there being some justification for all three—on the page.

7 Most undergraduates, in my experience, infer without hesitation that "He" is Macbeth, which I accordingly take to be the natural, spontaneous reading and often assume without comment in discussing the play in the classroom—where in spring 1996 Oliver Thoenen, a history major originally from the United Kingdom, who had done Macbeth on his A levels, rightly drew me up short with the note in Bevington s Bantam edition (just quoted). The present essay germinated from class discussion of the matter.

8 Among post-1950s editors silent on "He" are Dent, Evans, Harbage, Hunter, and Greenblatt. I sympathize with this exercise of editorial restraint.

9 Noting that Bradley "strongly supported the view that this refers to Malcolm," R. A. Foakes (1968) continues that "it is more often taken as a reference to Macbeth" and that he "think[s] Macduff has Macbeth in mind" (4.3.216, 127).

10 Garry Wills has recently expressed the view that

Malcolm becomes a physician to Macduff's grief for his wife and children. . . . It is true that Malcolm is manipulative here, as in the testing scenes. He is fashioning Macduff into an instrument of his purpose. . . . The shrewd manipulator is far closer to James's image of himself than is the wimp or milksop Malcolm so often seen on the stage. Malcolm only takes his proper station in the play if we see him as the great counter-witch pitted against Macbeth. He has "purged" and strengthened Macduff. Now he launches him at the target, "devilish Macbeth." (123-24)

11 There is in fact no way of knowing whether she remembers or fantasizes—as well as no reason to doubt her. Thus it is easy to see why some might argue that Shakespeare fulfilled his dramatic intentions in the contextual impact of this speech, without giving further thought to the child or children alluded to, presumably because not part of his envisioning and design. Stephen Booth writes that "Lady Macbeth's mysteriously missing children present an ominous, unknown, but undeniable time before the beginning" (94); and that's true, too.
It is significant that while Macduff invokes "gentle heaven" to related purposes, Macbeth invokes "fate" and brings it on himself, not unassisted but of his own will in a special application of the idea that "character is fate" (Novelis), which George Eliot (The Mill on the Floss, 1860) thought "one of his questionable aphorisms" (6.5) but Thomas Hardy approved (The Mayor of Casterbridge, 1886, chap. 17). The idea is expressed first in the West by Heraclitus:

In round numbers supplied by Marvin Spevack's Character Concordance (in vol. 3, Tragedies) based on the first edition of Evans's Riverside Shakespeare, Macbeth has 32% of the dialogue to Lady Macbeth's 12%, ranking fifth in percentage of dialogue behind Hamlet (of course; 39%), Timon (36%), Henry V (33%), and Iago (33%—.02% less than Henry).

It follows that his treatment of 4.3 looks beyond character: "the conversation between Macduff and Malcolm has never been adequately explained" (42). It has three functions, "but the main purpose of the scene is obscured unless we realize its function as choreic commentary. In alternating speeches the evil that Macbeth has caused is explicitly stated, without extenuation. And it is stated impersonally" (43)—and he quotes in illustration. Since in much of the scene "the impersonal function of the speaker is predominant. . . [t]here are only two alternatives: either Shakespeare was a bad dramatist, or his critics have been badly misled by mistaking the dramatis personae for real persons in this scene" (44).

Tim Albery, director; Roger Allam as Macbeth. Cf. Rosenberg:

In the theatre some Macduffs have alluded to Macbeth, some to Malcolm. The New Monthly Magazine, in 1828, complaining about one stage Macduff's implication that Macbeth was meant, argued for Malcolm, "who is so forward with his counsel to a heartbroken father." ... [Leigh] Hunt, too, saw Macduff turning away from Malcolm as "unable to understand a father's feelings," rather to Ross, for sympathy. When a Macduff of Kean's played it as Hunt suggested, the critic was impressed at the "deep and true effect . . . far beyond that which can be produced by any denunciation of impotent vengeance." (554)

Who Has No Children in Macbeth?: References


Clayton, Tom. 1997. "Macbeth's 'Yet I will try the last' What? (Macbeth V. Viii. 32)." N&Q 247, no. 4 December.


Teaching Guide

Teaching Guide: Introduction

So you’re going to teach William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Whether it’s your first or hundredth time, this classic text has been a mainstay of English classrooms for generations. While it has its challenges—murder, violence, elevated language—teaching *Macbeth* to your class will be rewarding for you and your students. It will give them unique insight into Shakespearean tragedies and important themes surrounding ambition, betrayal, and blood feud. This guide highlights the text’s most salient aspects to keep in mind before you begin teaching.

**Note:** This content is available to Teacher Subscribers in a convenient, formatted pdf.

**Facts at a Glance**

- **Publication Date:** 1606
- **Approximate Word Count:** 18,700
- **Author:** William Shakespeare
- **Country of Origin:** England
- **Genre:** Shakespearean Tragedy
- **Literary Period:** Early Modern, Renaissance
- **Conflict:** Person vs. Supernatural, Person vs. Self
- **Setting:** Scotland, 10th Century
- **Structure:** Five-Act Play, Blank Verse, Heroic Couplets
- **Tone:** Tragic, Eerie, Uncanny

**Texts That Go Well With *Macbeth***

*Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens is a novel that traces themes of ambition and successful attempts to improve social standing. The protagonist, Pip, suffers along the way but eventually realizes his ambition through hard work and moral uprightness. When compared with Macbeth, Pip is an example of ambition used for good rather than violent ends.

*The Last King of Scotland* by Giles Foden is a novel about the rise of Ugandan president Idi Amin told through the perspective of a Scottish doctor who works for the dictator. The doctor’s deteriorating moral compass and compulsion to corruption and paranoia offers an alternative perspective on Macbeth’s relationship to Lady Macbeth.

*Oedipus Rex*, also known as *Oedipus the King*, by Sophocles tells the tragedy of a man, Oedipus, struggling against fate with disastrous consequences. Like Macbeth, Oedipus also becomes king at great cost, fulfilling the prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Similar themes of the struggle against fate and guilt over horrific actions complement *Macbeth*.

*The Talented Mr. Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith is a novel about a man named Mr. Ripley who murders Dickie Greenleaf in an attempt to take his privileged social position. He continues murdering in order to secure his position. Ripley demonstrates similar themes of murder and ambition, but Ripley does not feel remorse for his actions.
Throne of Blood, directed by Akira Kurosawa is a film from 1957 that depicts the story of a warrior who assassinates his king after hearing a prophecy that he will be king. If your course considers film as narrative art, this film serves as a direct retelling of Macbeth that dramatizes the relationship between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth. This is a great resource to demonstrate tone and the uncanny to your students.

Teaching Guide: Key Plot Points

Act 1, Scene 3: Macbeth and Banquo meet with the three witches who prophesize that Macbeth will become king and that Banquo’s sons will be kings for a long time. In the preceding scene, Macbeth is described as a fearsome, honorable warrior, and yet his ambition is piqued with this prophecy. This is the moment in the play when reality is inverted: the noble warrior becomes power-hungry and honorless.

Act 2, Scenes 1 & 2: Macbeth murders King Duncan and Lady Macbeth uses the bloody daggers to frame the two guards who are sleeping. The dynamic between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth is important to highlight: she commands his actions. Macbeth already demonstrates his guilt and regret when he says he has “murdered sleep.” Insomnia becomes a motif that represents a guilty conscience.

Act 3, Scene 4: After ordering Banquo’s murder, Macbeth and his wife hold a banquet. Banquo’s ghost appears and Macbeth almost confesses to murdering Duncan, Lady Macbeth interferes and sends the guests away. This is a turning point in the play at which Macbeth’s inner turmoils manifest themselves as external entities—namely, a ghost only he can see. It also materializes Lady Macbeth’s sins. This is the last moment in which Lady Macbeth is in control of her husband and their situation. As soon as she loses this control, she slips into madness.

Act 4, Scene 1: Perhaps the most famous scene from Macbeth, this act begins with the witches’ preparing a potion in the woods. After listing a number of horrifying ingredients, they say “something wicked this way comes,” in reference to Macbeth. After the turning point in which his guilt is externalized, Macbeth embodies wickedness. While the witches are thought of as threatening, evil creatures, they identify Macbeth as a “wicked” thing.

Act 5, Scene 1: Lady Macbeth is now sleepwalking and wringing her hands to wash away blood that no one else can see. Lady Macbeth’s inability to sleep is a sign of her guilty conscious and madness.

Act 5, Scene 5: In the most famous monologue from this play (“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow . . .”), Macbeth outlines one of the main themes of the play right before he is defeated by Macduff’s army. Using a metaphor that compares life to a performance on a stage, Macbeth claims that ambition, achievement, and fame are all illusions that dissolve in death and time. In other words, he has spilt blood for a meaningless cause.

Teaching Guide: History of the Text

Shakespeare’s Source Text: Shakespeare’s main source text for the play comes from Raphael Holinshed’s 1577 The Holinshed Chronicles, a history of England, Scotland, and Ireland.

- Mac Bethad mac Findlaich was the 11th King of Scotland from 1040–1057. He murdered King Duncan to achieve his position. Between 943 and 1097, ten of the fourteen kings who ruled Scotland were murdered in attempts to seize power. It was not uncommon or surprising for a change of rule to come about from violence.
- In The Holinshed Chronicles, Banquo collaborated with Mac Bethad mac Findlaich to kill Duncan because Duncan was a bumbling king, unfit to rule. Shakespeare changed Banquo’s character to an
antagonist to Macbeth in order to appease King James I, who came to power in 1603. James I was Scottish and thought to be related to the real-life Banquo. Thus, Shakespeare turned Banquo into a wise, noble, and morally righteous man.

**Disreputable Early Modern Theaters:** In Shakespeare’s time, theater was considered low-brow entertainment. The Globe Theater and Blackfriars, the two main theaters where his plays were performed, were located outside the city walls of London. This meant they were able to challenge and subvert the crown’s laws more securely. It also meant that other disreputable forms of entertainment, such as prostitution and bear baiting, surrounded the theaters.

- The location and culture of the early modern theaters accounts for the occasional sexual humor throughout *Macbeth*, especially with the character of the Porter. It also serves as comic relief in an otherwise serious play, giving the audience a chance to collect themselves before returning to melancholy ruminations on guilt.

**Teaching Guide: Significant Allusions**

**Humanism and the Early Modern Renaissance:** Shakespeare wrote in the late 16th, early 17th century when humanism was a dominant philosophical ideology in England. The humanism cultural movement turned away from medieval, religious scholasticism to revive ancient Greek and Roman literature—which focused on human thoughts, feelings, and motivations rather than divine or supernatural matters. Many of the allusions in *Macbeth* reference Greek and Roman mythology and figureheads, despite its inclusion of supernatural elements:

- **Bellona** (act 1, scene 2): Bellona is the Roman goddess of war, and Macbeth is said to be like her husband, suggesting that he is gifted in battle.
- **Tarquin and Lucrece** (act 2, scene 1): In Roman mythology, Roman Prince Tarquin rapes Lucrece, a woman married to Collantine, a soldier. Lucrece commits suicide because she has broken her vows to her husband. Her death incited revolt that led to the banishment of the monarchy and the establishment of the Roman Republic. The reference to Tarquin’s “ravishing strides” allude to his stealthily creeping to Lucrece’s chamber in the middle of the night, where he was careful to wake no one.
- **Neptune** (act 2, scene 2): Neptune is the Roman God of the sea, which is his domain. Because he is a god, Neptune is said to control the ocean and its waves.
- **Oedipus** (act 2, scene 2): Oedipus is character from Greek tragedy who murders his father and marries his mother because he tries to escape his fate, which has been prophesied. Due to intense guilt over fulfilling the prophecy, he stabs out his own eyes. Macbeth alludes to doing the same as punishment for killing Duncan.
- **Hecate** (act 2, scene 2; act 3, scene 5; act 4, scene 1): As the Greek goddess of magic, witchcraft, ghosts, and necromancy, Hecate is appropriately mentioned in conjunction with approaching night, a time when nefarious acts would likely occur (act 2). She also appears directly to the witches, chastising them for not keeping her informed of what they’re telling Macbeth. She predicts Macbeth’s personal failing that will be his undoing—his overconfidence (act 3). Again she returns to praise the witches’ efforts as they sing around the cauldron, showing their supernatural power (act 4).
- **Gorgon** (act 2, scene 3): A Gorgon was a monster with hair made of snakes whose stare could turn a person to stone. Macduff claims that the sight of the king’s body will freeze a person in their tracks with shock, not unlike a Gorgon’s stare.
- **Mark Antony and Caesar** (act 3, scene 1): Julius Caesar defeated Antony in civil wars throughout the Roman Empire. Macbeth compares himself to Antony, whom he views as lesser, and Banquo’s potential to Caesar, who overshadowed Antony’s accomplishments.
• **Acheron** (act 3, scene 5): Also called the “river of woe” in Greek mythology, Acheron was one of the five rivers of the underworld. It’s an appropriate place for the witches to meet with Hecate, their hellish patron.

• **Roman Fool** (act 5, scene 7): This refers to a folktale in which a Roman soldier killed himself to avoid facing his enemies. Macbeth still believes he is unbeatable, despite two of three aspects of the witches’ prophecy of his downfall having come true. He sees suicide as beneath him.

**The Gunpowder Plot:** In 1605, a group of Catholic dissenters attempted to assassinate King James I by plotting to blow up the House of Lords, England’s Parliament. The scheme aimed at creating a Catholic head of state by installing Princess Elizabeth, James’s daughter, on the throne. An anonymous letter was sent to authorities, who then discovered thirty-six barrels of gunpowder below Parliament and thwarted the plot.

• “**An equivocator**” (act 2, scene 3): Father Henry Garnet knew about the gunpowder plot but failed to come forward. When he finally confessed, he claimed that he could not tell the truth because the plot had been revealed in confession, where he was bound to keep silent. He became known as the “great equivocator” and was hanged. The Porter references letting this historical figure, who would have been known to Shakespeare’s audience, into hell.

• “**The innocent flower, but be the serpent under it**” (act 1, scene 5): This image is a reference to the medal that King James created to commemorate the Gunpowder Plot. It pictured a snake hiding amongst flowers. Lady Macbeth advises her husband to appear pleasant and normal in order to fool the king and his men that he has no nefarious plans.

**Teaching Guide: Teaching Approaches**

**Banquo as a Foil to Macbeth:** Initially, Banquo and Macbeth are similarly portrayed as skilled, honorable soldiers. Soon, however, Banquo’s prudence serves as a foil to Macbeth’s haste; Banquo’s reaction to the prophecy is measured, skeptical disbelief rather than Macbeth’s immediate, ambitious belief in the prophecy. While Banquo’s reaction seems to be the “right” way to respond to the prophecy, because the witches have turned the world upside down with their prophesying and supernatural abilities, he is rewarded for his goodness only posthumously with royal descendants.

• **For discussion:** How do Macbeth’s and Banquo’s traits contrast with one another? How is Banquo rewarded for his goodness, and Macbeth for his wickedness?

• **For discussion:** How does Banquo’s ghost act as Macbeth’s conscience?

**Establishing the Supernatural with the Uncanny:** The witches and other supernatural elements of the play—visions of daggers, for example—are associated with otherworldly situations that are not quite right or in accordance with nature. The witches begin the play by upsetting the natural order by declaring that good is evil and evil is good (“Fair is foul, and foul is fair”). In this way, the supernatural elements of the play have some grounding in reality as readers question whether the events truly are supernatural or just the visions of mentally unstable and confused minds.

• **For discussion:** What role do the witches play in Macbeth’s downfall? How are they set apart from other characters in the play—societally, linguistically, spiritually? How do their dress and dialogue in the first scene set the tone for the rest of the play?

• **For discussion:** Are the ghosts and other visions that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth witness real or just manifestations of guilty consciences?

**Lady Macbeth’s Guilt as the Cause of Her Madness:** Highlight the contradictory nature of Lady Macbeth’s character. She claims both that she would dash her own child’s brains out in order to achieve her ambitions
and that she cannot murder Duncan because he looks like her father. Lady Macbeth spurs her husband to action and sets the murderous plot in action, but also she exhibits moments of humanity, regret, and depression.

- **For discussion:** From our first introduction to Lady Macbeth’s character, it does not seem likely that she has any moral compass. Yet, by the end of the play, she is apparently driven mad by guilt. What accounts for this sudden change of heart? Could something else explain her madness other than guilt? Or does she show this conscience throughout the play?

**Prophecy as Revealing Character:** Notice the difference between how Macbeth and Banquo hear the prophecy that the witches tell them. Macbeth schemes for how he will take the throne with murder, whereas Banquo doubts the witches. How a character interprets a prophecy demonstrates their true nature. Though Macbeth is initially presented as a strong, honorable hero, he is actually an ambitious, unscrupulous man.

- **For discussion:** How is Macbeth’s reaction to the witches different from Banquo’s reaction to the witches? Why is this significant?
- **For discussion:** Consider the second time Macbeth speaks to the witches. How does he interpret the prophecies that they tell him? What does this tell us about his character?

**Theme of Ambition as the Catalyst for Macbeth’s Downfall:** Explain that Macbeth’s unchecked, ruthless ambition to become king leads to his downfall in this play. His ambition corrupts his identity as a noble warrior and turns him into a murderer. Likewise, Lady Macbeth’s ambition causes her to become an unnatural monster. This fatal quest for ambition mimics the Greek tragic-hero cycle, in which a hero’s hubris (pride) or ambition causes her downfall.

- **For discussion:** How do Macbeth’s and Lady Macbeth’s parallel ambitions doom them? After the initial murder, what drives Macbeth to further acts of cruelty? Are Macbeth and Lady Macbeth prideful to a fault, or are they doomed by their confidence in prophecy rather than reliance on their abilities?

**Theme of Fate vs. Free Will:** Highlight the tension between the fate that the witches predict for Macbeth and his free will to pursue or not pursue this fate. Macbeth is either predetermined to murder Duncan and cause his own downfall, or he creates this terrible future with the choices that he makes.

- **For discussion:** Is Macbeth’s downfall caused by the witches or is it the result of his own wrongdoing? How does fate shape the outcome of the story? How does choice play a role in Macbeth’s tragic end?

**Additional Discussion Questions:**

- What role does magic play in this drama? To what extent does magic actually bring about the outcome of the play?
- What role does blood play metaphorically and physically throughout the play? What might blood represent?
- How does a character’s relationship to sleep reveal their internal landscape?
- Does Macbeth have a moral lesson? Why or why not?
Tricky Issues to Address While Teaching

It’s Written in Iambic Pentameter and Verse: Shakespeare manipulates syntax and word choice to fit his meter and flow. This can make it hard to comprehend the lines at first glance.

- **What to do:** Rent an unabridged, taped performance of the play. Play the tape and read along as a class. Pause the tape at key moments to discuss language, plot, characters, and foreshadowing.

Portrayal of Women as Corrupting Influences: The few female characters in this play are not reputable women. There are witches, Lady Macbeth, and the faithless Lady Macduff. Women are depicted as the orchestrators that corrupt the men in the play.

- **What to do:** Discuss the role of women with your class. Ask students how the women are powerful even though they are evil. Discuss the connection between the story of Adam and Eve with this depiction of corrupting female presences in order to determine the origin of this negative presentation of women.

Shakespeare’s Language Is Unapproachable for Students: Shakespeare’s language can be really difficult for students to understand. However, it is not written in “old English” or even “middle English”; it is written in modern English and therefore comprehensible with some practice.

- **What to do:** Outline the whole plot of the story before beginning the play so that it is easier to follow. Consider hanging a timeline on the board or asking students to recap the plot at the beginning of each class.
- **What to do:** Start with a short passage and ask students to translate Shakespeare’s archaic language into plain English so that they can become familiar with the style.

The Cultural References Are Archaic: Shakespeare makes allusions to Greek and Roman mythology and religious stories that students might not be familiar with because they are not part of our culture.

- **What to do:** Do a short unit introducing students to Greek and Roman mythology before you start teaching Shakespeare. Explain that humanists, like Shakespeare, use a lot of allusions to ancient literature to get their message across. Consider bringing in a hip-hop, pop, or rock song with allusions to modern culture to illustrate your point. (Parody singers are especially useful for this activity.)
- **What to do:** Have students underline the names of people and places in the first act or scene who they do not know. Use minimal research projects to ask students to look up these allusions.

Alternative Approaches to Teaching *Macbeth*

While the main ideas, character development, and discussion questions above are typically the focal points of units involving this text, the following suggestions represent alternative readings that may enrich your students’ experience and understanding of the play.

*Focus on Lady Macbeth’s character as an empowered woman who goes insane.* She sets the events of the play in motion, yet this power drives her mad. Lady Macbeth seems to only feel regret for her actions when her husband begins to reveal what they have done. In other words, only when her society sees her as something evil does she begin to feel guilty for her evil actions. Discuss what this says about the role of women at this time.
Focus on how this play established our modern conception of witches and the supernatural. Look at how the witches are described in acts 1 and 4. Compare this description to characteristics of Lady Macbeth. Discuss how Lady Macbeth can be interpreted as a kind of witch that manipulates fate.

Teaching Guide: Suggested Essay Topics

Act I
1. Macbeth struggles with his conscience and the fear of eternal damnation if he murders Duncan. Lady Macbeth’s conflict arises when Macbeth’s courage begins to falter. Lady Macbeth has great control over Macbeth’s actions. What tactics does she use to gain control over him? Cite examples from Act I. Does she solve her conflict through her actions? Cite examples from Act I.

2. Shakespeare begins *Macbeth* with Witches talking on a barren stretch of land in a thunder storm. This creates a certain atmosphere and mood. What images contributed to the evil atmosphere? Do you feel this mood continues through Act I? Did the actions and dialog of the main characters reinforce this atmosphere?

Act II
1. The Witches are characters that have a powerful impact on the play, but have very few lines. Banquo says that he cannot sleep because he is thinking about them. Macbeth says that he has not thought about them at all. How do the characters of Macbeth and Banquo differ and what influence have the Witches had on each character?

2. Macbeth is alone while Lady Macbeth returns the bloody daggers when he says, “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather The multitudinous seas incarnadine, Making the green one red.” Lady Macbeth returns will blood on her hands as well. What does the blood symbolize? Cite examples from the play.

Act III
1. There is a turning point in Act III, Scene 4. What is that turning point and how do you think Macbeth will respond throughout the rest of the drama? Cite examples from the play.

2. Compare and contrast the murders of Banquo and Duncan. How does the murder of Banquo show the change in Macbeth?

Act IV
1. What is the symbolic purpose of each prophecy the Apparitions state in the play? What interpretation can be drawn from the way each are dressed. Do you feel there is a hidden meaning? Cite examples from Act IV.

2. Act IV, Scene 2 is the only scene Lady Macduff is in. Why do you feel Shakespeare chose to have the murder in the scene instead of having it reported, as with Duncan’s murder?

Act V
1. Describe Macbeth’s reaction to Lady Macbeth’s death. Compare his reaction to the reaction he had after the murder of Duncan.

2. Elaborate on the importance of the scene when Lady Macbeth says, “Out damned spot! out, I say! One; two. Why then ’tis time to do’t. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afear’d What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our pow’r to accompt? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” This scene illustrates a change in the character of Lady Macbeth?
Short-Answer Quizzes

Short-Answer Quizzes: Act I Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. What atmosphere is established in Scene 1?

2. How does Banquo describe the Witches when he first sees them upon the heath?

3. Macbeth is reported to be a valiant soldier in Act I. The line, “Till he unseamed him from the nave to th’ chops And fixed his head upon our battlements”, paints a different Macbeth. What can you infer from that line?

4. In Scene 1 the Witches say, “Foul is fair and fair is foul.” Which characters do you consider fair or foul?

5. Why do you think Shakespeare opened Scene 3 with the Witches discussing an evil deed they have committed?

6. What prophecies do the Witches make for Macbeth and Banquo?

7. What does Lady Macbeth mean when she says of Macbeth, “Yet do I fear thy nature. It is too full o’ the milk of human kindness To catch the nearest way”?

8. Macbeth is having second thoughts about killing Duncan. What are the reasons he gives? Based on these reasons what does he decide?

9. What does Lady Macbeth mean when she says, “Was hope drunk Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since? And wakes it now to look so green and pale”?

10. What decision does Macbeth make at the end of Act I? What has Lady Macbeth said to influence his decision?

Answers
1. The scene is filled with Witches, thunder and lightning, which creates a dark and sinister atmosphere.

2. He calls them “withered” and “wild” in their attire; “That they look not like the inhabitants o’ the’ earth;” and that they “should be women...yet [their] beards forbid [him] to interpret that [they] are so.”

3. Macbeth is a cold-blooded killer on the battlefield.

4. The Witches are foul because they are evil. Macbeth and Banquo seem to be fair because of their loyalty and bravery. However, Macbeth reveals his plan to murder Duncan and his character is viewed differently. Lady Macbeth is foul. Macdonwald is foul because he is a traitor. The Captain and Duncan are fair because the Captain fought bravely and the King supports him and is compassionate regarding the Captain’s injury.

5. The Witches are capable of creating situations that are evil and destructive. However, their powers are limited as they cannot destroy, but they have the power to create an atmosphere where destruction can easily occur.
6. The Witches state that Macbeth will be Thane of Cawdor and King. They go on to tell Banquo that his son’s will be kings.

7. Lady Macbeth feels that Macbeth is kind and he may not be able to overcome his fears to kill Duncan. She fears his conscience will override his ambition to be King.

8. Macbeth is torn between his ambition and his conscience. He gives several reasons why he should not kill Duncan: 1) Duncan is his cousin; 2) He is a loyal subject to the King; 3) Duncan is his friend; 4) Duncan has never abused his royal power; and 5) Duncan is a guest in his home. Based on these reasons, Macbeth decides not to follow through with the murder of Duncan.

9. Lady Macbeth is questioning Macbeth why he has changed his mind about killing Duncan. She is asking him what has happened to his ambition.

10. Lady Macbeth persuades Macbeth to follow through with the plan to murder Duncan. She calls him a coward and less than a man, prodding Macbeth to follow her plan. Macbeth agrees to murder Duncan that night.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act II Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. What are Banquo’s concerns about the Witches prophecy? What is Macbeth’s response?

2. What does Macbeth see when Banquo and Fleance leave and what does he say about it?

3. What was Lady Macbeth unable to do in Duncan’s chamber? Why?

4. What was Macbeth’s reaction when he returned from Duncan’s chamber? What did he say?

5. Who was sleeping in the second chamber? Why did Shakespeare include that information in the play?

6. Macbeth is unable to return to Duncan’s chamber with the bloody daggers. Why do you think he fears going back?

7. What does Lennox say to Macbeth about the previous night?

8. Who discovers that Duncan has been murdered?

9. Why does Macbeth say he has murdered the guards?

10. Why do Donalbain and Malcolm leave? Where do they say they are going?

**Answers**

1. He has had bad dreams about the Witches and part of what they said has come true. Macbeth says he has not thought about them. Banquo would like to discuss the matter with Macbeth.

2. He sees a bloody dagger floating before him. He says that it is only a dream.

3. She was unable to kill Duncan because he looked like her father.
4. He was upset and feeling guilt. He said that “it was a sorry sight.” He also stated that he had murdered sleep and he could not say amen when he needed to.

5. Donalbain was sleeping. This puts suspicion on him.

6. He cannot face the murder that he has committed. He feels too much guilt.

7. Lennox said that there was a bad storm and he has never seen one this fierce in his life.

8. Macduff discovers Duncan’s slain body.

9. Macbeth says he murdered the guards because felt they killed Duncan. He was so angry and grief stricken he could not control his rage.

10. Donalbain and Malcolm because they fear for their own lives. Donalbain goes to Ireland and Malcolm goes to England.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act III Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. As Act III begins Banquo is reflecting on what has happened to Macbeth. What three events does he state and what does he hope for himself?

2. What reason does Macbeth give the Murderers for wanting Banquo killed? What reason does he give for not doing it himself?

3. Why do you think Macbeth does not tell Lady Macbeth about his plan to murder Banquo and Fleance?

4. When Banquo’s ghost enters the banquet what is Macbeth’s reaction?

5. What does Lady Macbeth say to the guest is the reason for his behavior?

6. Does Macbeth recognize the ghost? How do you know he does?

7. What does Hecate say she is going to do to Macbeth? Why does she think he will respond to her?

8. What does Lennox say about Malcolm, Donalbain, and Fleance?

9. Where has Macduff gone and why?

10. What does Lennox hope for?

**Answers**
1. Banquo says that Macbeth was made King, Thane of Cawdor and Thane of Glamis. He hopes his sons will be Kings.

2. Macbeth fears for his own life if Banquo lives. Macbeth says that he and Banquo have the same friends and Macbeth would not be able to remain friends with them if he killed Banquo himself.
3. Macbeth either feels that Lady Macbeth may try to talk him out of the plot, or he wants to have full control and exclude her from this matter.

4. Macbeth questions who has brought Banquo to the feast and he is very upset.

5. Lady Macbeth tells them that he has suffered from this affliction his entire life and to ignore his behavior.

6. Macbeth recognizes Banquo and says to the ghost that he should not blame him for the murder, “Thou canst not say I did it: never shake Thy gory locks at me.”

7. Hecate is going to create a situation that will allow Macbeth to ruin himself. The Witches will make a magic potion that will guide Macbeth’s fate by telling him the future. Hecate says mortal men cannot resist knowing the future.

8. Lennox says they have been unjustly accused of murder.

9. Macduff has gone to England to join Malcolm’s forces to overthrow Macbeth.

10. Lennox hopes that Scotland will be peaceful again.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act IV Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. What are the Witches doing at the beginning of Act IV?

2. What are the three statements made by the Apparitions?

3. What is the significance of the Witches having the Apparitions give the information to Macbeth?

4. What does Macbeth decide to do with the information the Witches have given him?

5. What does Lady Macduff say is the reason for her husband leaving?

6. What does Lady Macduff tell her son about his father? How does he respond to her?

7. What happens to Lady Macduff and her son?

8. Why does Malcolm question Macduff?

9. What is Malcolm’s reaction to the news? What is Macduff’s?

10. What do Malcolm and Macduff plan to do?

**Answers**
1. The Witches are standing over a cauldron preparing a spell for Macbeth.

2. The Apparitions say: 1) That Macbeth should beware of Macduff, 2) That no man born of a woman can harm Macbeth, and 3) Macbeth will not be harmed unless Great Birnam Wood comes to high Dunsinane.
3. The Apparitions are dressed in such a way to give insight to Macbeth. He is blinded by his quest for power and does not recognize the significance of the appearance.

4. He plans on going to England to kill Macduff.

5. Lady Macduff feels her husband is scared and is a traitor.

6. Lady Macduff tells her son his father is dead. Her son does not believe her.

7. Lady Macduff and her son are murdered.

8. Malcolm wants to know if Macduff is sincere and that he has not been sent by Macbeth.

9. Malcolm is enraged by the news of Lady Macduff’s death. Macduff is in shock at first then he vows to seek revenge against Macbeth.

10. Malcolm and Macduff plan on killing Macbeth and restoring the peace in Scotland.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act V Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. What does the Doctor say to Macbeth about Lady Macbeth’s condition? What is Macbeth’s reaction?

2. What is the Doctor referring to when he says, “Therein the patient Must minister to himself?”

3. What does the Messenger tell Macbeth he sees coming toward Dunsinane? How does Macbeth respond?

4. What does Macduff vow to do to Macbeth and why? Cite an example from Act V.

5. What difference can you cite between Macbeth’s army and Malcolm’s army?

6. Whom does Macbeth kill in Act V? Do you feel that is important? State your reasons.

7. What does Macbeth say to Macduff about his mortality? What is Macduff’s response? How does Macbeth react?

8. What does Ross tell Siward about Siward’s son?

9. What does Malcolm say about Macbeth and Lady Macbeth?

10. What title has never been used before in Scotland that Malcolm plans to use on his Thanes and kinsman?

**Answers**
1. The Doctor says Lady Macbeth is very ill and he cannot cure her himself. Macbeth is angry and does not want to be bothered with this information.

2. The Doctor is saying that Macbeth is trying to tell the doctor how to cure his patient, Lady Macbeth. When in fact Macbeth is the patient himself.
3. The Messenger tells Macbeth that trees are moving toward the castle. Macbeth does not believe him at first; then, sounds the alarm for battle.

4. Macduff vows to have revenge on Macbeth because of the death of his family.

5. Malcolm’s army if committed to the cause of saving Scotland. Macbeth’s army is fighting for him out of fear they will be killed themselves.

6. Macbeth tells Macduff that he cannot be harmed by man born of woman. Macduff tells Macbeth that he was ripped from his mother’s womb. Macbeth realizes that the Witches have tricked him.

8. Ross tells Siward that his son was killed in battle.

9. Malcolm says that Macbeth is a “butcher” and Lady Macbeth was a “fiend-like queen”. He also says that Lady Macbeth took her own life.

10. Malcolm plans to make the Thanes and kinsman Earls.